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COVER: The heroic legends of King Arthur's Camelot surround this "Knight at Sunset." Painting by Don Maitz. **ABOVE:** FBI Agents Scully and Mulder, seen here with Director Skinner, continue to investigate the strange, paranormal cases found in The X-Files. See story page 20.

Departments.

7 EDITORIAL

Sensing the presence of magic is not always seeing it.

8 LETTERS

10 BOOKS BY GAHAN WILSON

Uncovering spooky fantasies in America's past and present.

20 TELEVISION BY DAN PEREZ

The Good, the Bad, and the Scary: Horror Writers on The X-Files

26 FOLKROOTS BY TERRI WINDLING

The Road That Has No End: Tales Of The Travelling People

64 GALLERY BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

The Fantasy Art of Bob Eggleton

76 GAMES BY MARK SUMNER

Microprose's latest empire builder is as good as a box of chocolates.

86 CONTRIBUTORS

REALMS OF FANTASY

Fiction.

34 THE CHURCH AT MONTE SATURNO

By Robert Silverberg

When confronted with the impossible, the rational man has two choices: believe or run. Or both.

44 THE RIGHT SORT OF FLEA

By Richard Parks

As time goes on, greatness passes from the world. Can it be saved for future generations?

50 BLESSING THE LAST FAMILY

By Batya Swift Yasgur and Barry N. Malzberg

The writing is on the wall, but remains there a creature wise enough to read it?

54 STORMCHILD

By Susan Wade

What did the wind blow in on the cold and snowy day? Love, perhaps.

58 LAWNMOWER MOE

By William Eakin

Return with us now to the otherworldly, yet commonplace town of Redgunk, Mississippi. The mummy's brain is gone now, but magic still grows there.

70 THE HOUSE

By Anne Harris

This is a story about a haunted house and some of its terrible inhabitants. But it's not really a fantasy at all. You'll see.

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Sensing the presence of magic is not always seeing it.

TWO YEARS AGO, MY HUSBAND, our four year old daughter and I ventured to Ireland. Crumbling ruins and stone towers and forts and tombs and castle walls stand beside the modern and the mundane. The ruins are just allowed to BE, and people live and work beside them without violating them. I must confess the effect was quite haunting. In truth, for ten short days I became convinced (or perhaps was just wishing with all my heart) that a wee bit of inexplicable magic might overwhelm the boundaries of our reality.

We traveled through the barren moon-cape of Connemara, where a wild, white pony pranced atop a hill and vanished in a patch of fog. We paused to contemplate the eerie, imperial Twelve Bens Mountain range and tiny towns where roofs were thatched and Guinness was the only magic potion available. When we came upon the town of Oughterard, we decided to stay. My husband, Mark for the grand Lough Corrib and its incredible fishing, me because I felt both unsettled and comfortably at home in the place. Something otherworldly would visit me here, I was sure of it (perhaps a restless spirit of the McCabe clan, warriors hired as mercenaries by the fierce Celts).

It was here we went out on yes, a misty morning, no other way to describe it, to fish Lough Corrib with thick, unwieldy fishing poles meant to catch the pre-historic looking fish that swam there. I was sure something long and scaly, resembling Nessie, would be rolling alongside the hefty rowboat. I was sure of it. When I stared into the blackest of waters, I felt something was staring back. If not a sea serpent, then perhaps the Lady of the Lake perhaps. It is likely the fishing guide thought the way I watched the water was quite mad, or perhaps that I was willing my stomach away from a boat sickness. In any case, it was Caitlin needing the bathroom that brought the trip to a timely end with nary a fish or Celtic sea monster in sight.

Later, we stayed at Ashford Castle in the village of Cong. While the outer walls of the castle and the scenery were quite breathtaking, the interior renovations had exorcised any magic, as far as I could tell. Our room might have been at the New Brunswick, New Jersey Hilton and we were snubbed at dinner for bringing a child to the table. I didn't look

for anything mystical here, though I tried in vain to summon a spell against the *maitre de*. The only melancholy presence was the sight of my husband as he watched the trout leap and splash about during the week after trout season had ended.

On the last day of our trip, we traveled by ferry across the mouth of Galway Bay to Inishmore, one of a trio of islands known as the mystical Aran Islands. It seemed a place quite lost in time—at least to the eyes of a tourist on a bicycle climbing the deadly, deceptive little hills with shaky legs and cursing whatever god might be listening. Pagan. That is what I sensed on the isle of Inishmore. Something feral and stony and pagan. Pale cottages with bright doors, peat smoke, sheep, bicycles, ecclesiastic stone ruins and megalithic tombs flanked on all sides by the deep, cold sea. We did not see too many native islanders. A few in the pub, one in the cottage with the pink door selling woolens, and the man at the bicycle rental. It seemed the people who lived on Inishmore were avoiding us. We were tourists treading on ground that felt not entirely welcoming, hills of great power, ruins of old and discarded faith. I felt uneasy here, not right with the land because I wasn't born to it. The shame of it was, we had planned to take the last ferry back to the mainland. We were not prepared to stay overnight in one of the few bed and breakfasts there, we were not to be caught on the island after dark, though I suddenly longed to be.

As we boarded the ferry in the purple dusk, I felt a tremendous sense of loss, a gathering sadness that I had failed at some primordial expectation. Wrapped tightly against the gloom and the chill ocean air, leaning against my husband and holding my daughter in my arms I watched the island of Inishmore grow smaller and smaller—various hills and eerie stone shapes outlined stark and still against the darkening sky. I imagined hooded figures emerging from thatched-roof cottages, away from the warmth of the peat fires and roasting meat. I imagined the island people were coming out of hiding, trekking to their ruins in some sort of anti-tourist ritual ceremony. I swear to you I saw flickering dots of candle fire moving in crumbled stone windows. I am sure if we stayed on the island that night something would have come to me. I am sure of it.

Rebecca McCabe

REALMS OF FANTASY

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NUMBER 4

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Dear Ms. McCarthy;

Hi! I really love *Realms Of Fantasy*, but lately I've noticed that some of the stories have been straying from what I'd consider to be fantasy. For example, "Love Equals Four, Plus Six," by A.M. Dellamonica, in the December 1996 issue. While it was a very lovely story, it didn't seem to be fantasy to me. Maybe I'm just an old-school fantasy reader, where dragons, unicorns, faeries, wizards and gallant warriors reign supreme.

I am also wishing for a little more information in your magazine about any of the "Dragon Lance" authors or artists. I'd love to see more about the people who make those wonderful books happen. Perhaps a cover by Larry Elmore? (hint! hint!) Another author I would love to see something about is Mercedes Lackey. I have been a huge fan of her novels for several years now. Perhaps a book review or a bio? Thank you so much for your time and keep up the good work.

Melissa J. Boynton
Skowhegan, ME

Regarding "Love Equals Four, Plus Six" by A.M. Dellamonica — fantasy encompasses the inexplicable, the metaphysical nature of things and that is what we saw in this piece — perhaps not a traditional fantasy, but then again, R.O.F. is a publication of eclectic fantasy literature unlike any other magazine on the market today.

However, you raise a good point, Melissa, regarding traditional fantasy works. Let me take this opportunity to say we would very much like to publish a little more traditional fantasy. Writers, are you listening? We are always on the lookout for well-crafted tales of grim sorcery and graceful swordplay. Incidentally, stories steeped in literary tradition and historical detail are welcome. Recycled television plots are not.

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

Realms of Fantasy is one of the best magazines to come along in quite some time. The stories are consistently good, the layout appealing, and the illustrations incredible. In fact, the only complaint I have has nothing to do with the magazine itself, but with something you said about the odds of selling a story to the magazine.

Whether R.O.F. receives 5,200 stories per year, or 5,200 stories per day, really has very little to do with the odds. Number of stories received versus number of stories bought matters only if all manuscripts received are of exactly the same quality, and stories purchased are drawn from a large drum containing these stories.

Simply put, if a writer submits a story of a high enough quality, or more correctly, a story the editor of a given magazine believes is of high enough quality, that story is almost certain to get published. On the other hand,

if a writer submits a story that is of poor quality, it almost certainly will not be published.

I'm hardly a household name, but after having sold five novels and thirty some short stories, I am at that stage where beginning writers often ask me for advice. I tell them to read much, write much and to ignore the odds because they simply are not relevant.

It seemed an important enough topic that I write my own letter. I hope you agree with me, and will inform beginning writers who read your magazine that the quality of an individual manuscript received is the determining factor in whether or not you buy it, and that the quantity of manuscripts received bears small relevance.

James A. Ritchie
New Castle, IN

You do have an exceptionally good point, the pool of high quality stories is considerably smaller than the pool as a whole. Therefore, if your story is wonderfully written and perfect for our magazine your odds of having it published, here or elsewhere, are better than if your story is not a good one.

However, if I can only publish approximately 42 stories per year I just do not have the space to publish every terrific story that graces my desk. Hey, we're only ONE Magazine!

Your advice to new writers is pertinent though. I hope all new writers out there pay heed to it. And I'd like to add something if I may — write because you love to, not just to get published. It will show in your work, I promise.

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

I had the privilege of picking up a recent issue of R.O.F. I was not only impressed by the quality of the writing, but by the diversity of writers as well. I would like to briefly comment on your editorial. While all fantasy is fiction, I do not believe all fiction is fantasy. While I agree that *The Natural* was a wonderful movie, I do not believe it meets the criteria for fantasy. I do not presume to be the authority, but being a fan as well as a writer of fantasy, I think that the subject matter has to have that extra element that separates it from the ordinary (?) work of fiction. *The Natural* does not have that element, but *Field of Dreams*, *Danm Yankos* and yes, even *Angels in the Outfield* does. What exactly that element is will be decided by better minds than mine.

Jim Elliot
Carlsbad, CA

Okay readers and writers — what elements do a fantasy make? Love to hear from you on this subject, better minds and all the rest.

Dear Ms. McCarthy;

A Mr. Bushemi wrote recently to defend the beleaguered Mr. Flanagan, which is fine. However, he chose to defend him by attack-

ing stories that you have published in this magazine. In particular, he went after Sarantonio's "Snow," Clayton's "Pavanne," and Lee's "Doll Skulls," for being clumsily-written and cliché-filled. That was going too far for me.

I think Tanith Lee's "Doll Skulls," is one of the best stories published in R.O.F. this year. I do not always like her Paradis stories, but this one gave me a strong feeling for the 19th century. Not only did Ms. Lee describe her setting convincingly, but her writing style seemed very 19th century as well. I would hardly call this piece clumsily written.

Since the mid-70s I have read *Fantastic Stories*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Twilight Zone*, *Science Fiction Age*, and now *Realms of Fantasy*. I think that you do a fine job of mixing fantasies set in Medieval times with those set in modern times. You mix everything from American Indian traditions to horror stories. I hope you continue to devote your magazine to this extremely diverse collection of fantasy works.

Michael Samerdyke
Wise, VA

G'day, there!

No doubt every other armchair air ace in the world has told you by now that while the airplane illustrated with "Holding Pattern," is a kinda nice Piper, it's definitely not a Piper Cub. They're right, by the way. To sum it up, a Cub is smaller, has but one engine, has the wings mounted high and is a tail-dragger. Sorry I don't have a picture of one to send you.

A nice story though, and a good blend of fact and fiction. Only, I don't get this reference to diesel. I always thought all "props" were gasoline-powered and that all jets fed on kerosene, but I've been wrong before.

Now, would somebody please inform Mr. B.A. Bushemi that I'd like to flame him most thoroughly for putting down Jo Clayton's "Pavanne for a Dead Pross." This, and Dyer's "Radiomancer and Bubblegum," are my personal favorites. I don't dig "Snow," but it is different.

There is, between a large number of people in a little country named Belgium who'd wish fervently they had someone like Ms. Harmony and the White Ladies among them if they had read "Pavanne."

Reynir H. Stefansson
Reydarfirdi, Iceland

Your letters and comments are welcome. Make sure you mark them as letters or they're likely to get mixed in with writers' guidelines requests. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, P.O. Box 527, Ramson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, E-mail: s.mccarthy@genie.geis.com. ☛

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Uncovering spooky fantasies in America's past and present.

CERTAIN PLACES IN CERTAIN ERAS ARE PARTICULARLY CONDUCTIVE TO THE SPIRIT OF THE fantastic grotesque and therefore more liable than the rest to be chosen by writers of stories about imaginary and terrific events.

Some of these places are more obviously helpful than others. It does not take a rocket scientist among writers of supernatural events to realize that crumbly, dusty old houses with big attics and cellars full of rats will provide a nourishing climate for the evil doings of their more moldering, bone-showing ghosts, or that a circle of mossy, leaning stones hidden in the dip of some mist-soaked moor will most certainly make the first crawling appearance of their gigantic and thoroughly beslimed survivor of unguessable eons at least a touch more credible.

Of course the author must always be sure that his strange happenings and creatures are appropriate to these encouraging locales (unless he wants to cast against type, of course, but that is a whole other area of discussion) so he will, by and large, choose dazzling Arabian lands of yore to frame his djinnis and magic lamps and tend to locate his dragons in Arthurian lands so that there will be sufficient courtly knights and beauteous maidens to provide appropriate reactions.

A mad scientist story with echoes of Wells's Invisible Man, Fritz Leiber's early novel, The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich has been reprinted with illustrations by Jason van Hollander.



I love — no exaggeration — all of the traditional times and places I have just cited, but it is my growing conviction that we are fortunate or unfortunate enough (take your pick) to be living right here and now in what may well turn out to be one of the juiciest and most fecund times and places to spawn imaginary events that ever happened.

Perhaps — though admittedly it's a tough contest — the most bizarre spot in full flower on the globe during this extraordinary era of ours is Los Angeles. It is both a city immersed in astonishing complex societal turmoil bearing fascinatingly ominous implications for the rest of the country, and the nest of what started out as the movie industry but is rapidly developing into a fearsomely influential *something else* as yet but dimly understood and currently unnamed.

Todd Grimson has located his new fantastic novel *Brand New Cherry Flavor* (Harper Prism, NY, NY; 344 pp.; \$20.00 hardcover) in Los Angeles, almost, it would seem, in order to scientifically demonstrate what absolutely perfect support the place offers for the wildest flights of fantasy a writer of possibly boundless imagination can come up with.

The heroine of the book is Lisa Nova, a spectacularly good-looking 26-year-old woman determined to make her mark in cinematic history. She has — together with Christina Rien, her best friend and co-producer — created *GIRL*, *10*, *MURDERS BOYS*, an angry (in a cool sort of way) shocker that has achieved considerable cult celebrity, but she views it strictly as a starter and is desperately eager to move along to bigger and better efforts.

As the book opens Lisa has discovered that her affair with "whatever the hell his name was, Lou Greenwood, Lou Adolph, Lou Burke", a V.P. in charge of development at a major studio, has soured, and along with it her hopes of working with legendary director, Selwyn Popcorn, and if you think Grimson is a little too fanciful with the names just check the running credits at the end of your next movie.

Unhappy with all of this, impulsive Lisa decides on taking revenge and starts working her way through a marvelously realized pack of Hollywood fringe types to find a means of getting it.

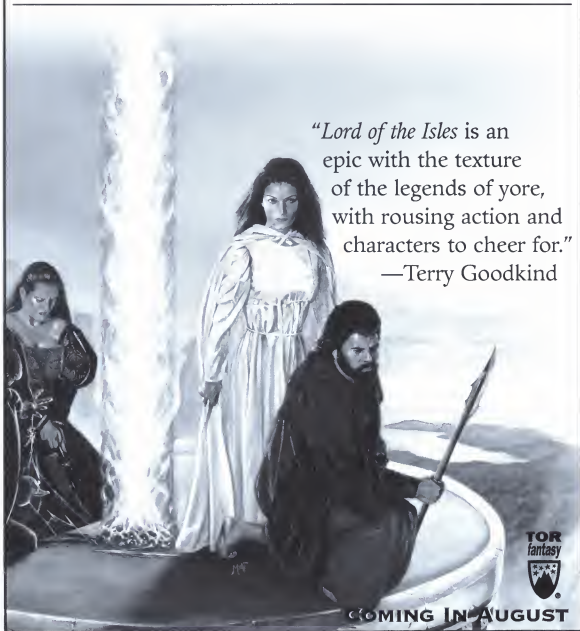
She starts with Code, one of the Painkillers, a musical group with "two dance-club hits: *Imitation Ho Chi Minh*,

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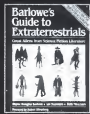
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the remix; and *Guiled Youth*, with its timely chorus *jeunesse dore*. Code sends her to Ultra Jim, a DJ at Overplus, a colorful evening spot catering to a clientele given to practicing variously violent sexual games in its back rooms. Ultra Jim presses a number of designer drugs on her and then gives her the address of Zed, who lives in a big, pastel blue, aluminum trailer standing in front of a smallish pink house "blackened and almost burned down to the ground," Zed lives in the trailer with Joey, a transvestite whose surgical alterations have given him/her spectacular proportions and whose face is temporarily swathed in bandages due to an operation that supposedly will transform it into an exact likeness to that of Daryl Hannah. Over grilled cheese and cat-sup sandwiches, with warnings ("Don't blame me if he wants to turn you into a zombie biker chick with three hundred tattoos"), Zeb gives Lisa the address of Boro.

Boro turns out to be a distinctively ugly man with dreadlocks and a quantity of symbols and signs tattooed all over his body. He wears dentures, a braided vest, a little leather bag hung around his neck, dirty jeans, and beat-up biker boots to go along with his

Harley-Davidson low-rider and six other bikers who move around so very, very slowly that Lisa comes to realize they must be zombies.

After a little chat it's obvious Boro rather likes her and the deal is set with a neat little exchange:

"I'll do his whole family," Boro said, introspectively.

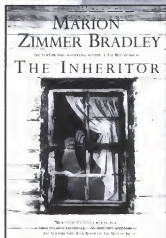
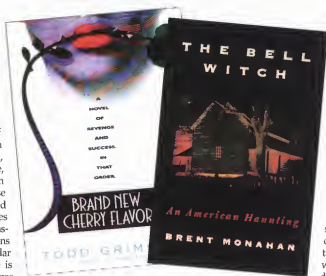
"That's what I feel like. Is that OK?"

"Sure," she said. Already things seemed slightly out of control. She was playing tough to please him, to play at what she sensed he wanted her to be. But it seemed fun, a goof.

He laughed. "I like women who can be cruel. We'll get along."

Boro shortly begins a series of increasingly convincing demonstrations that he is a magician of enormous power and that Lisa could hardly have picked a man better qualified to bring ruin upon Lou Greenwood, Lou Adolph, Lou Burke, and his loved ones. He is so effective, in fact, that Lisa starts to have qualms: some small ones about his overshooting what she had in mind along the lines of revenge; much more important ones about her association with him becoming downright dangerous to herself.

The most impressive aspect of *Brand New Cherry Flavor* is how convincingly Grimson manages to weave more and more bizarre, pulp-style sorcery into a really very accurate portrayal of Los Angeles and the movie business without making Boro's grotesque sorceries and vile necromantic doings seem either incredible or even incongruous. He makes it seem not only plausible but downright inevitable that sooner or later — if not actually now — the environment provided by that town and its major industry is conducive to, and perhaps even desperately needful of,



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Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

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Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National



*The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like **The Coming of Dawn**, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.*

Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

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Having awarded over \$150,000.00 in prizes to poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world. Anthologies published by the organization have featured poems by more than 100,000 poets.

"We're always looking for new poetic talent," said Mr. Ely. "I hope you urge your readers to enter the contest. There is absolutely no obligation whatsoever, and they could be our next big winner."

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connection with the darkest and most demonic supernatural hanky-panky possible.

Unfortunately, at least for me, the book falters at its end in a variety of ways. It all shrinks suddenly down to the kind of detective story action that has been satirized very effectively in the rest of the book up to then; the rise of Lisa from her solipsistic pit seems to reverse into sentimentality, and it climaxes with an all-is-forgiven sequence that not only brings everything to a grinding halt more or less in the middle of nowhere, it makes you doubt the validity of its major characters. I found it weirdly like those bad horror movies that patch on a quick final scene to show the monster wasn't really killed and that you can confidently expect a sequel.

However, that said, and in spite of it, *Brand New Cherry Flavor* conclusively demonstrates that Todd Grimson is a really talented writer and that he is likely to do some powerful stirring up of the fantasy field, which will be good for it all around. He just needs to let his powers loose a little more. I'm glad I read it and am eagerly looking forward to his next book.

It is a very long jump in time and space from the Los Angeles of today to the wilderness of Tennessee in the early 1800s, and *The Bell Witch* by Brent Monahan (St. Martin's Press, NY, NY; 199 pp.; \$20.95 hardcover) is certainly a very different sort of book from *Brand New Cherry Flavor* even though these are both very much American stories.

But *The Bell Witch* tells about another America altogether. This one is still a nation putting itself together, still nailing down holdings on its East Coast, establishing its northern and southern borders, feeling its way across the vast continent to the West and only a few decades distant from the trauma of its coming Civil War.

The novel is based very closely on a poltergeist haunting that supposedly actually took place in the locale described. The doings of this particular poltergeist achieved considerable lasting notoriety because it did what no other such thing had ever done before: It killed a man.

The characters in the book are based on and named after the historical persons who were involved in the affair, and it's told in the form of a warning written by a father to his daughter only to be opened "should unexplained noises or other unnatural occurrences begin around ... (your mother) ... or if she begins to have fits or fainting spells."

This ominous communication is purportedly discovered in the attic of a recently deceased aunt by a Mrs. Davis in 1995 who read it, "got scared so bad I couldn't sleep for three nights," and passed it on to Monahan who saw to it the document was informatively footnoted, illustrated with charming prints from the time of the original journalistic coverage of the events, and printed by St. Martin's Press.

Throughout Monahan keeps a perfect feeling of the period and his spooky story unfolds

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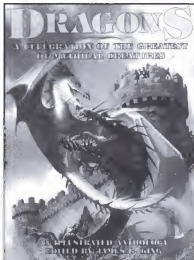
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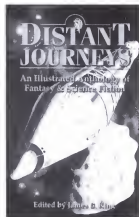
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with just the proper sort of pacing and the awed sense of wonder that Richard Powell, remembering it all from his days as a young teacher come to educate the rural young of the Red River area, would certainly have felt.

The mood and feel of many great American writers are evoked in the building of the tale. It starts very like a moral fable of Hawthorne with nervous villagers attempting to deal with the grotesque behavior of huge Kate Batts when she interrupts an evangelistic service by sitting on — and nearly smothering — a poor fellow attempting to confess his joy at seeing the light of the Lord. It has long been suspected by the locals that Miss Batts is some version of a witch, and when she lays an enthusiastic curse upon wealthy farmer John Bell for scolding her on account of her rude, un-Christian action, few are all that surprised when ominous, unnatural beasts are observed by Bell prowling about his property. There is a large, black dog with an oversized head, for example, and then a gigantic bird larger than a turkey.

But far weirder is the entity observed by Betsy Bell, John's pretty young daughter, while minding her younger brothers. It's the figure of a girl about Betsy's age all dressed in green who they observe eerily hanging with both arms from the lower branch of a tree and swinging slowly back and forth. The apparition vanishes abruptly when the children come too near for its liking.

Strange sounds are heard in the fields, nearer and nearer each night to the Bell's handsome farmhouse. Then there are rappings and bangings on the house itself. Then the house itself is invaded with frightening racket and finally the strange visitation invisibly invades the bedroom of little Betsy, stripping the blankets from her body, then pulling her roughly about the floor by her long, braided hair.

Of course, by now the story of this haunting has spread far and wide, and as increasing numbers of neighbors come to view the wonder, the spirit, apparently very aware it's on display, develops a new expansion to its repertoire: it begins to talk; to chat and answer questions with all its visitors. First in one female voice and then blossoming out in multiple personalities.

It's at this point the story reminded me of another American author responsible for a good part of our national consciousness: Mark Twain and his *The Mysterious Stranger*. As with Twain's angel in that appalling fable, who builds and destroys its mud villages and people for reasons seemingly far beyond human motivations, the reader is more and more puzzled by its weirdly diverse actions. Why is it so cruel in some ways and so kind in others? One minute it howls threats to take a life, the next it gently pulls a whole sleighful of children for their delight.

And when savants and magi for miles around turn up to "understand" and "solve" the problems presented by the entity, the story

Continued on page 83

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The Good, the Bad, and the Scary: Horror Writers on The X-Files

IT SEEMS LIKE NOW, WELL INTO THE FOURTH SEASON OF FOX'S MEGA-HIT *THE X-FILES*, IS TRULY the best of times. The show easily made the transition to Sunday nights, leaving its Friday night slot to creator Chris Carter's dark, moody, *Millennium*. The show has had its *Simpsons* crossover ("The Springfield Files," featuring the voices of Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny) aired recently, and Scott Adams' cartoon character Dilbert has embraced the show. On the Internet and the online services, loyal X-philes are posting thousands of messages per day, discussing everything from Gillian Anderson's divorce to who is really the offspring of Cancer Man.

On alt.tv.x-files, there's even an online role-playing game of sorts, where users take on various personas in a virtual village called X-village. There's a general consensus among fans that the fourth season has been particularly good so far. Whoopi Goldberg will guest star in an upcoming episode, and according to Carter, best-selling horror writer Stephen King is writing an episode for the series. A feature film, which will be a follow-up to the fifth-season cliffhanger finale, is in the scripting stage, and planned for a 1998 release.

If there's any dark cloud to all this silver lining, it may be the planned departure of the show's creator/executive producer after the end of the fifth season. According to *Variety*, Carter will likely be leaving both *The X-Files* and *Millennium* after the 1997-98 season to concentrate on making movies. Whether there will be life after Carter for *The X-Files* is a subject open to speculation, but the contracts for the show's investigative duo extend beyond the end of the fifth season, and Fox certainly has a strong desire to keep its franchise show alive and well. There's even a possibility that Carter will stay with the show, but

that depends on whether Fox will meet his reported \$1 million per episode asking price.

I thought it might be fun to check in with some professional horror writers and get their take on the show. Our panelists: Stephen Mark Rainey is the editor of the award-winning horror magazine *Deathrealm*, and has published stories in anthologies such as Whitley Strieber's *Aliens*. Billie Sue Mosiman is the author of the Bram Stoker-nominated *Widow* from Berkley, as well as a host of horror and suspense short stories in anthologies like *Psycho Paths*, edited by the late Robert Bloch. Craig Shaw Gardner is a former president of Horror Writers Association whose latest book is the Ace hardcover *Dragon Burning*, volume 3 in the *Dragon Circle* trilogy. Kevin J. Anderson is the best-selling author of the first two hardcover *X-Files* novels, *Ground Zero* and *Ruins*, published by HarperCollins; and the science fiction thriller *Ignition*, co-written with Doug Beason.

Realm of Fantasy: What's the best thing about *The X-Files*?

Rainey: Well, you've got a classy production that features a couple of solidly drawn protagonists whose chemistry is about as good as it gets. Scully and Mulder are very believable as human beings, doing a job that puts them in the center of some of the most fascinating, speculative situations possible. There aren't and haven't been many shows that take the supernatural and/or paranormal and successfully frame them against a serious, somber backdrop; while *The X-Files* sometimes injects humor into the episodes, the subject matter isn't played as a joke or played down to meet the expectations of adolescent viewers.

A lot of times, even episodes that I would consider uneven or clumsily rendered contain fascinating aspects, such as the episode that gave us the newsreel biography of Cancer Man. And when the show is good, it's often brilliant; the episode with the circus freaks (where humor was a pervading element) and the one with the deranged, inbred brothers come easily to mind.

Mosiman: The best thing about *The X-Files* are the creative avenues the show investigates and the ambiguity that is part of the show. Maybe a lot of people don't care for the ambiguity, but that's one of the things about it that fascinates me.

Gardner: *The X-Files*, by and large, is a spook show in

Agents Scully and Mulder continue to investigate the FBI's X-Files in the hit show from Fox Television.



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the best sense of the word. It sticks together elements of science fiction and horror, and shows that these can be very entertaining. I think *The X-Files* manages to take a lot of pseudoscience and current myths and things and brings them entertainingly to life, while never actually proving anything. (Laughs) It purports to show something but it never really goes so far as to get our disbelief going. I think the very best *X-Files* episodes are the ones written by Darin Morgan, which are the ones that actually manage to carry forward the goals of the show while making fun of it at the same time.

Anderson: I like that it's genuine-quality TV; each episode seems to be made with all the care that some people put into making an actual movie. Like some other science fiction shows that I won't name, it's not just slapped together with people standing around saying their lines and flying off to another planet in the end. The camera angles, the lighting, the music, the acting, the suspense—everything makes it feel like this is real solid stuff rather than something whipped out by people who have done far too many episodes already. I just enjoy feeling like I'm respected as an audience member in that it doesn't make me feel like an idiot. It does some really subtle and good stuff.

And also, it's just plain scary. There aren't many "suspense" stories on TV that actually make me nervous at all, and *The X-Files* sometimes really pulls some good ones on us.



Left, Mulder confronts Cancer Man during last season's final episode, "Talitha Cumi." In "Unrule," Agent Scully is menaced by a killer who unwittingly leaves psychic images on photographic film.



ROF: The worst thing about *The X-Files*?

Rainey: The number of episodes that fall on their face due to either ambiguous storytelling or the screenwriters not having any idea where they're actually going with a plot. The government conspiracy/alien cover-up episodes are the most frequent offenders. By introducing one cryptic element after another without following up on earlier leads, or sometimes from just plain bad writing, the show is often ruined.

Mosiman: The worst thing about *The X-Files* is when they sometimes jump on some popular bandwagon and ride down old dusty lanes. The show about the Mexican phenomenon, el Chupacabra, was disap-

pointing in a way because *The X-Files* just followed a popular lead. On the other hand, they tried to make it stranger than even the Mexicans think of it (as a goat-blood-sucking-vampirish-flying-something-or-other), so that was pretty cool. Still, why jump on popular fears instead of coming up with new and nifty ideas that haven't been talked to death?

Gardner: That awful show where they tried to make cats scary—there's no way to make cats scary. What was that horrible Stephen King movie? *Sleepwalkers*? That was one where they tried to make cats the central scary thing. It's perhaps worse trying to make bunnies scary. Probably the worst thing about *The X-Files* is they're caught up

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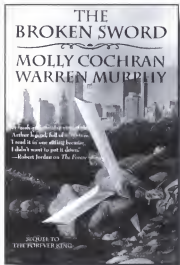
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in sort of a conundrum—you realize as you watch it that certain truths are never going to be revealed. Because if they reveal certain truths, they're going to cut their noses off. And so we're never really going to find out the truth about the aliens. I think what will happen with *The X-Files* eventually is that it'll become more and more apparent where the seams are. Right now they're sort of dancing around that. There are so many new questions being posed, without any of the old questions being answered, that I've started to go, "What?" There's both a "what" and a "who cares" implicit in that. I've heard Chris Carter only wants to do it for five years, and I think that's a good idea.

Anderson: One of the detrimental aspects that it may have with the popularity it has is that as a show, it entertains by playing around with all sorts of these bizarre conspiracies and stuff. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who take that a bit too seriously. I've met a lot of these fans at *The X-Files* conventions who believe that this is really showing the truth; that there really are ten layers of shadow governments and weird, bizarre experiments are being perpetrated on eighth-grade kids in Chicago schools, and other strange things. It kind of adds a dark paranoia to a world that's already a little bit crazy.

It's all for fun, guys. It's fiction.

ROF: Do you have any favorite episodes?

Rainey: A couple of them. The circus freaks, featuring "The Conundrum," stands out, as does the episode with the incestuous, deformed brothers. The episode featuring Peter Boyle as a psychic, and the most recent episode about an alien enzyme that generates the Chupacabra was quite well done: nicely creepy.

Mosiman: I don't have a favorite episode. I've missed some of them so I'd hate to choose one right now. I guess I like all of them to some degree, some more, some less.

Gardner: I'd have to say "War of the Coprophages" if only for that cockroach skittering across the screen at one point. I really like the Darin Morgan episodes: I think they're the best overall. I sort of appreciate the truly icky episodes sometimes. The incredibly incestuous family, with "Chances Are" playing on the radio. I mean, that was fun! (Laughs) It wasn't deep, but it was fun.

Anderson: I've tended to have one that I really like strongly about every season. The favorite one that I have is in the first season, called "Beyond the Sea," where Scully's father dies, and Brad Dourif is a convicted killer and he claims he's getting messages from her father, and there's another serial killer on the loose. That one just really affected me a lot and I used it in my first [*The X-Files*] novel *Ground Zero*. There's also one last year where Peter Boyle was an insurance salesman who could see the future, which of course is a great thing to do if you're selling insurance and there's some really fun things there. They've managed to pull off some very strong candidates every year.

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ROF: Even though Chris Carter has vowed that it will never happen, should Scully and Mulder just go ahead and have sex?

Rainey: Nope. Anytime a show wants to kiss its ass goodbye, they put the main characters into a sexual or romantic relationship. Kills the imagination. As long as they're partners doing their job, each with an obvious strong feeling for the other, the viewer's imagination can fill in all the details it wants to, in essence, building on the characters and making them stronger in the viewer's mind.

Mosiman: No, Scully and Mulder shouldn't have sex. They're fine as colleagues. I don't see any point in making it romantic when they're an investigative team and that's worked just fine so far.

Gardner: I think never. I think they have a classic sort of John Steed/Emma Peel relationship. Look at *Lois and Clark*: aAnytime the characters in a show start having sex, the ratings go down the toilet.

Anderson: From a fiction point of view I don't think that's a good idea because then you basically shoot all your points. Over and over again in TV shows where you had this burning almost-relationship going on for a long time and in a lot of them—*Cheers* comes to mind—they actually let them get together, then it just falls to pieces. I think [Mulder and Scully] should continue to make eyes at each other and be very good and caring friends. And wake up sweaty from fantasies of each other every once in a while.

ROF: Where would you like to see *The X-Files* go in future episodes?

Rainey: I'd like to see the conspiracy paranoia episodes stay in the minority; the best shows are usually those that put Scully and Mulder in an eerie, tension-filled situation that resolves itself or something close to it at the end of the episode.

Mosiman: I'd like to see it come up with some creative angles that haven't been done before and aren't in the popular culture.

Gardner: I would actually like to see some more development of Scully's character. They've done a lot with Mulder's character, and besides killing off various members of Scully's family, they haven't done much with her character. It would be fascinating to see Scully go out on a date.

Anderson: That's the burning question for me because I've got a third novel I have to write, so I've been trying to figure out where to go that the show hasn't gone. We're in the fourth season now, and we're getting to a point where every obvious paranormal, mysterious, unexplained phenomenon has been dealt with in some issue or another.

But I always enjoy the good old *Night Stalker*-like episodes: Mulder and Scully go off against the monster or supernatural event of the week and have a real nice adventure and it's scary. It ends kind of on a creepy note and then they go off with Mulder being totally convinced and Scully being sure that there's a rational explanation. That's kind of the formulaic episode, but I really like those. ☛

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The Road That Has No End: Tales Of The Travelling People

HUSH YE, HUSH YE, DINNA FRET; THE BLACK TINKLER WINNA GET YE YET," GOES ONE old Scottish lullabye, echoing the fear with which Gypsies ("Tinklers," "Travellers" or "Rom") have long been regarded. Like other groups of cultural Outsiders, superstitions about the Gypsies abound: accused in centuries past of witchcraft, child theft and cannibalism, today they are still disparaged as fundamentally shiftless, crafty and dishonest. To some extent, this portrayal holds a kernel of truth if one judges by *gadjo* (non-Gypsy) values — for Gypsies prize family ties, group loyalty and frank enjoyment of life over such "*gadjo* foolishness" as a life of hard work for the sake of wealth. And while Gypsy ethics dictate fair treatment and honesty among themselves, tricking the *gadjo* out of a bit of hard cash is another matter...Often (to people with few other trades open to them) a matter of survival.

Traditionally, the Rom are a secretive people, clannish, wary of outsiders. They have no written history — or much interest in such history. But linguistic evidence supports the theory that the original Gypsies probably came from the Indian subcontinent, entering Europe in successive waves from the 14th century onward. Passing themselves off as pilgrims from Egypt, or as royal refugees from the fictitious land of "Little Egypt", the earliest nomads were tolerated in medieval Europe when the fervor for religious pilgrimage was at its

height. This tolerance waned as their population grew, and persecution of Gypsies has been the norm ever since. In the last several hundred years the Rom have survived enslavement, xenophobia, and successive threats of genocide to become one of the largest minorities living in Europe today. Four years ago, the International Romani Union was granted voting status by the United Nations — although they are, uniquely, not only a people without a homeland, but without even a dream of a homeland. Their dreams, their songs, and their stories are of the road that has no end.

Precise statistics are impossible to determine, but it is estimated that over thirty thousand Gypsies live throughout the world, loosely linked by language and customs, by music, dance and story. Despite the deep suspicion with which the Gypsies themselves are regarded, their mastery of the arts of music, dance and storytelling has been widely acknowledged. The lore of the Gypsies, entwined with the folktales and songs of each country in which they have settled, forms one of the most vibrant and magical oral traditions evident today. According to a Cale Gypsy story (related by Serafina de Gaudix), at the beginning of the world "God made the 'Busno' [a nonGypsy] out of slime, then he made a woman out of the Busno's spare rib. Later on he found that the world was so dull with these two Busnos and their children that he said to himself, 'I must liven things up.' So one night, when the man was sleeping in his cave, God goes and takes a bit of his jawbone and in a twinkling of an eye, he makes out of it a stiff and sturdy 'Calorro' [Gypsy], alive and kicking."

A less flattering tale, related by the famously fatalistic Rom themselves, tells how a Gypsy blacksmith forged the nails that were used to crucify Christ. For this sin, his descendants are condemned to wander the earth, friendless and homeless. Their life ever since has been that of the road, which they travel in bands, or in family groups. Some lived in the traditional horse-drawn painted caravans (*zurdon*), others wandered the countryside on foot, carrying their belongings, tents and children upon their backs. Some had huts or permanent camps to live in during the cold winter months — but the Gypsy ideal was the freedom of the road, and a bedroll beneath the stars.

By the early 16th century, Gypsies could be found in every country in Europe, plying their traditional trades

Still surrounded by superstition, Gypsies originally migrated from India, surviving hundreds of years of persecution and genocide. Painting by Stephen Johnson.



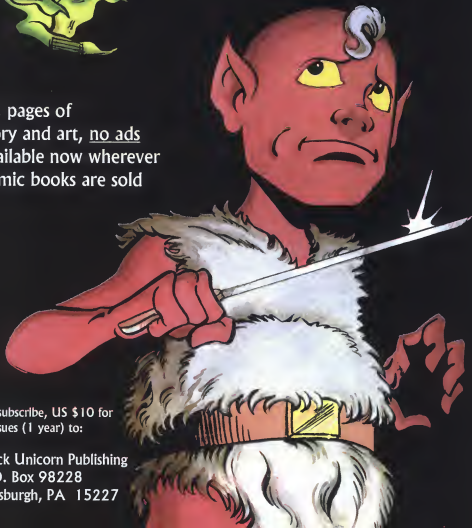
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Above, Gypsies on the move in France, from a 17th century engraving. Below, a gypsy family photographed by their wagon early this century.

of blacksmithing, woodworking, horsetrading, fortune-telling and crop-picking, as well as the performance arts. In every country where they wandered or settled, harsh laws were enacted against them, restricting their movements, their trades, sometimes their entire way of life. Ferdinand and Isabel of Spain (a country more amenable to Gypsies than most, and with a thriving Gypsy culture today) gave the Rom sixty days to abandon their wandering, threatening slavery on the galleys for violators. Philip III forbade them to use their own names, dress or Romani language "in order that this manner of life may be evermore confounded and forgotten." Spanish law grew ever more restrictive under Philip IV and Phillip V (echoed by laws elsewhere on the Continent), until by 1783 Gypsies were forbidden any of their traditional trades, to keep horses, or leave their place of domicile for any reason whatsoever. It was even forbidden for other Spaniards to refer to them as *gitanos* (Gypsies).

Historians Bertha Quintana and Lois Gray Floyd point out (in their excellent history of the Gypsies of Southern Spain: *Que Gitanos!*) that the sheer number of laws repeatedly directed against the gitano population of Spain attest to the laws' ineffectiveness; Gypsy culture thrived despite such persecution, and the Gypsy population rose. Indeed, life was easier for the Rom in Spain than elsewhere in Europe. In 17th century Denmark, "gypsy hunts" were organized by the king: one hunter listed, among the animals he'd shot that year, "a Gypsy woman and a suckling child." Other countries simply deported their Gypsies, burned them out, or poisoned water supplies. In Romania, Gypsy families were bought and sold as field and household slaves. This legal slavery,

similar to the enslavement of Africans in America, only ended in the mid-19th century — a fact that is shockingly little known today, even in Romania itself. Although officially freed in mid-century, the Gypsies continued to be assailed by the Romanian and other governments trying to cope "with the Gypsy problem". They were forced into settlement programs (herded into government housing blocks, where they promptly set up camps outside their front doors); they watched their children taken away for "re-education" and *gaijo* adoption; Gypsy women were forced, tricked and cajoled into government sterilization programs; they were brutalized by random acts of mob violence to which those in authority too often turned a blind eye.

"The Gypsies," writes sociologist Jean-Pierre Liegeois, "moving about in their nomadic groups, were seen as physically threatening and ideologically disruptive. Their very existence constituted dissidence." Centuries of persecution culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust, where approximately half a million Gypsies died alongside the Jews in Hitler's extermination camps. "What wrong is there to have dark skin and Gypsy-black hair?" asks one traditional Spanish Gypsy song. "From Isabella the Catholic, from Hitler to Franco, we have been the victims of their wars. On certain nights, I find myself envying the respect you show your dog."

Gypsy stories reflect this tragic history, and also the famous fatalism, and humor, with which the Rom shrug it off. In Gypsy culture, life is lived in the present — yesterday and tomorrow matter little to them. Once upon a time, goes a Serbian Gypsy tale, the Gypsies built a church of stone, while the Serbs built one of cheese.



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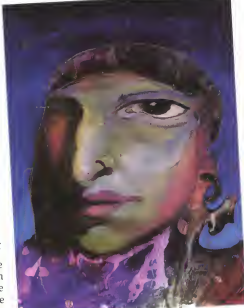
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When both churches were finished, the two groups agreed to an exchange — the Gypsies would give the Serbs their church of stone, the Serbs would give the Gypsies their church of cheese and five pennies besides. The Gypsies immediately ate up the church of cheese — which is why they have no church now. The Serbs still owe the Gypsies five pennies, and the Gypsies are still asking for them ... which is why the Serbs must still give Gypsies alms (and the occasional stolen fowl.)

From Russian Gypsies comes this cheeky tale: Once upon a time St. George was riding along when he came across some Gypsies. "Where are you headed?" he asked them. "Where the wind blows, and you?" they replied. St. George told those Gypsies he was headed for Jerusalem to see how the Lord fared. "Please remember us to the Lord," said the Gypsies. "Tell him we wander over the land, and ask him how we should live." St. George agreed, but the Gypsies feared that he would forget all about them again. One crafty Gypsy looked at St. George's horse, with its golden bridle. "I'll tell you what. Leave us your bridle. Then you will remember us Gypsies every time you mount your horse." St. George agreed, but he made the man promise to return the bridle upon his return. Then he went upon his way, until he met some peasants peeling timber for a house. The peasants were struggling mightily, for the logs were not long enough for the walls. "What are you doing there?" he asked them. "We're trying to stretch the logs," they replied. "But they won't give. Tell us what to do." St. George scratched his head. "I'll ask God if you like." The peasants were delighted with this, and St. George travelled on. He soon came upon two women pouring water from one well into another. "Have pity on us!" they cried. "Tell us when we can finally stop doing this?" "I'll ask the Lord," St. George replied and he carried on.

When he reached Jerusalem he asked for an audience with the Lord. First he asked about the Lord's health, and then he ventured to ask about the peasants and the women at the well. "I gave those peasants that stupid task," said God, "because they'd been so stingy before. Tell them if they'll be more generous and joyous and kind, I'll forgive them their sins. As for those women, I punished them for watering down the milk that they sold. But I'll pardon them too if they'll mend their ways, and be less stingy hereafter."

"I'll pass the messages on," said St. George. But as he went to mount his horse, he remembered the Gypsies. "I almost forgot. I promised to ask you how the Gypsies are to live." "They've never bothered me," said God, "so go and tell the Gypsies this:



Contemporary American artist Mark Wagner's portrait of a gypsy storyteller captures the spirit of the "Rom."

Let them live by their own laws. Where they pray, where they beg, where they take without leave — that's their affair. Tell them that." St. George set off down the road again, and he passed his messages on to the grateful women, and the overjoyed peasants. Eventually he came to the Gypsy camp. "St. George is here!" they cried. "So tell us, what did God say?" St. George slid clumsily off his horse, anxious to get his bridle again. "He said that where you pray, where you beg, where you take without leave — that's up to you. Now give me back my golden bridle." "What bridle?" ask the selfsame crafty Gypsy he'd spoken to before. "On my soul, I look no bridle from you. Let the moon cut me down if I tell a lie!" And so the bridle stayed with those Gypsies. After all, God did say it was up to them where they prayed, where they begged, and where they took without leave. They gave St. George a generous feast and a song, but the bridle remained.

In England and Ireland, folktale collectors have found a treasure trove of old stories and ancient folk ballads preserved by the Travelling People. Folksinger and scholar Ewan MacColl took an interest in Gypsy lore in the middle of our century, travelling around the British Isles with a tape recorder and a notebook. Hamish Henderson began his fieldwork with Scottish Gypsies in the 1950s; before that, the great wealth of Scottish Traveller tales was virtually unknown. Born in 1928, Duncan Williamson was the seventh child in a family of sixteen Scottish Traveller children. For many years, he has been one of the foremost tellers of *barrie mooskins* ("good stories" in the Anglo-Romani dialect). His wonderful Gypsy tales, with their distinctly

Celtic flavor, have been collected in *A Thorn in the Foot*, *The Bronte, Silks and Fairies*, and *Fireside Tales of the Traveller Children*. "On cold winter nights," he writes of his own childhood, "when early darkness enclosed the old travellers' camps, a father would turn round and take his children beside him. 'Listen children, sit down and be quiet — I'll tell you a story.' My father knew he was going to tell us something that was going to stand us through our entire life. Probably he had no tobacco for a smoke; probably we didn't have a bite of meat to eat, we had no supper. But we sat there listening to our father telling us a story and we were full. He was teaching us to be able to understand what was in store for us in the future, telling us how to live in the world as natural human beings — not to be greedy, not to be foolish, daft, or selfish — by his stories."

Jan Yoors is a *gadjo* who left his home and was adopted by Gypsies when he was twelve years old. He travelled eastern Europe in his Gypsy father's *vardon*, the traditional covered wagon, and came to be a well known storyteller himself. He describes the old Gypsy way of life in his introduction to John Hampden's *The Gypsy Fiddle and Other Tales*. "The folk tales, which in Romani we call *paramitsha*, are always told by one particular storyteller to whom these stories 'belong'. The gypsies have another extensive but unrecorded 'literature' — oral tradition would be a more correct description — consisting of didactic tales of experience, called *svatura*. These are supposed to be accounts of things that happened to the person telling the stories, and depict far-off countries through which the Rom travelled in the past. The Gypsies also express themselves in song. These are called *djilia*, more formalized and poetic in expression. Unlike the tales, the songs can be sung by anyone."

Gypsy music, from the passionately sad "Deep Songs" to the fiery Spanish flamenco, has inspired such composers as Ravel, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakov, Liszt, and (of course) Bizet; while Gypsy musicians from Django Reinhardt to the Gypsy Kings have enjoyed worldwide fame. Flamenco music and dance took Europe by storm earlier in our century; today it's enjoying a renaissance in the Nuevo Flamenco movement. Spanish dramatist Jacinto Benavente recorded the impact of a performance by Pastora Imperio, one of the greatest of Gypsy dancers: "When we watch [her dance] life becomes more intense. The loves and hates of other worlds pass before our eyes and we feel ourselves heroes, bandits, hermits assailed by temptation, shameless bullies of the tavern — whatever is highest and lowest in one ... Finally in a burst of exaltation we praise God, because we believe in God while we look at Pastora Imperio, just as we do when we read Shakespeare."

Carmen Amaya was also considered one of flamenco's greatest artists, as well as one

Continued on page 80

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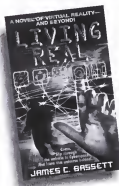
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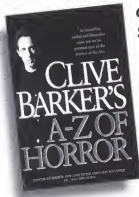
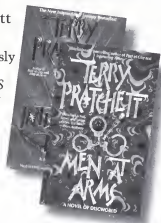
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THE CHURCH AT MONTE SATURNINO

*When confronted with the impossible, the rational man
has two choices: believe or run. Or both.*

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustration by Ken Granning

SERAFINA SAID, "YOU ARE English, no?"
"American, actually," Gardiner told her.
"I would say English. The studious look. The glasses. The bad haircut. The way you dress. Like you have money but don't think it's nice to spend it. Very English, I think."

True enough. Only he wasn't. And he had taken her at first glance for a simple Sicilian peasant girl, but obviously that was wrong also. There was nothing simple about her. Both of them, it seemed, had instantly

invented imaginary identities for each other and were working their way backward now to the actual ones.

"I'm a professor. An associate professor, actually. History of art." Who had taught at three different universities in fourteen years, and still was only an associate professor. Who did not even have his doctorate. And now was roaming the edges of the classical world peering at Byzantine mosaics in the hope they would somehow rescue him. "Associate professors often tend to seem a little English. I dress like this because it's what I can afford. It's also very comfortable."

They were sitting under a garbled old oak on a summer-parched brown hillside at the



edge of the little town of Monte Saturno in central Sicily, looking southward into a steep gorge densely covered on both slopes with tough, leathery-looking gray-green shrubs. The sky was a hot iron dome, painted a pale blue. Even at this early hour of the day the air was stifling. Gardiner felt a little dizzy. This was a dizzying place, Sicily. The air, rich with lemon and herbs. The heat. The dark fissures of decay everywhere. The beauty. The taint of antiquity, the unfathomable mysteries lurking in every narrow alleyway, behind every crumbling facade.

He had arrived in town late the night before, driving down from Palermo, and had known her for less than half an hour. He was just finishing breakfast at the little albergo where he was staying when she came in to chat with the proprietor, her uncle. Gardiner had lured her out for a stroll: past the low lopsided cathedral, the scruffy and padlocked municipal museum, the ancient windowless building that was the post office. Almost at once they were in the open countryside, staring out into the island's immense empty hinterland. She was long and lean, nearly as tall as he was, with prominent cheekbones, a long sharp nose, dark penetrating eyes. She had been born in this village, she told him, but lived in Palermo and had spent considerable time in Rome; she had come here a few days before to visit her grandfather, who was ninety. Gardiner found her attractive, and also oddly forward, flirtatious. But of course he knew better than to indulge in any fantasies. This was Sicily, after all.

"The history of art? You come to Sicily to study Italian art? There is some confusion here, I think. You should be in Florence, Venice, Rome."

"Not Italian art, especially. Byzantine. I'm writing a doctoral thesis on the transition from the Roman style of mosaic work to the Byzantine." How tidy that sounded! But he hardly wanted to tell her that he had come to Italy seeking something that he could not define, that his life, though satisfying in some ways, seemed fundamentally static and insubstantial: that he yearned for a coup, a grand achievement that would establish him before the world. Serafina sat leaning toward him, listening intently, with her long legs crossed, her hands outstretched on her knees. "You understand what that is, a doctoral thesis?" he asked.

"Capisco, sì." She was speaking mostly in English, which she handled well, though she dropped into Italian now and then for emphasis. Gardiner, fairly fluent in Italian, had begun the conversation in that language but something about her expression made him think that she found that condescending, and he had cut it out. She could be, he suspected, a prickly, difficult woman. "You write your thesis, they make you a dottore della filosofia, and then you become a real professor, that is how it works, no?"

"A full professor."

"Ah. Sì. So you are here to see our mosaics. Already you have seen the mosaics in Palermo? The Capella Palatina, the church of La Martorana, the cathedral at Monreale?"

"All of them. Plus the one at Cefalù. They're all later than the ones I'm studying, really, but how could I pass them up?" Gardiner loved mosaics with a powerful passion. Not for the religious scenes they depicted, which had no real importance or significance to him beyond an esthetic one. He was in no way a religious man. The holy saints and martyrs of the Christian mosaics and the gods and goddesses of the older, pagan ones were simply just so much mythology for him, quaint, mildly amusing. But the mosaics themselves — their plasticity of design, their glinting surfaces, their inner light —

that was what excited him. It was nearly impossible for him to put his feelings into words: an almost sexual yearning, focused on bits of colored tile glued to walls. He was possessed, and he knew it.

"And now?"

"Today I'll head down to Piazza Armerina, the Villa Romana, the palace of the Roman emperor. With absolutely wonderful mosaics."

"I have never been there," she said.

Never? That was odd. Piazza Armerina was, he calculated, no more than an hour's drive away. But New Yorkers never went to the Statue of Liberty or Parisians to the Eiffel Tower, either. Gardiner toyed with the idea of inviting Serafina to accompany him. "From Piazza Armerina I'll continue on south to Agrigento for a look at the Greek temples, and then up along the coast to Trapani, where I can catch the ferry for Tunis. The Bardo Museum in Tunis has one

of the finest collections of mosaics in the world." Into his mind now there sprang the wild notion of asking her to join him for the Tunisian expedition too, and he was startled by the sudden throbbing beneath his breastbone at the idea. On half an hour's acquaintance, though? At best she would laugh; she might spit in his face. The old days of impenetrably guarded chastity might be gone here, but at the outset she would want him at least to pretend that he thought of her as a respectable woman. He looked guiltily away, as if fearing that his intentions were visible on his face.

I should ask her now, he thought, about herself: where she went to school, what she does, how it happens that she speaks English so well. But he hesitated, momentarily unwilling to plod through the standard conversational gambits. A sharp silence fell between them. Gardiner heard the buzz and click of insects all around, and a peculiar ticking coming from a nearby tree, as though the heat were shrinking its bark. The sudden tension sharpened his senses, and he became aware of a tumult of Mediterranean scents assailing him on all sides, lavender, maybe, rosemary, the fragrance of prickly-pear blossoms and lemon leaves.

A hawk drifted diagonally across the sky. Gardiner, idly following its path with his eyes, watched it descend abruptly into the gorge as if diving to seize a rabbit. As his gaze traveled downward with the plunging hawk and he noticed for the first time what appeared to be a small isolated building on the far side of the valley, all but hidden in the scrubby brush. Not much more than the curving arc of its low white dome was visible. Something about the shape of that dome aroused his attention. He had seen buildings like that before. But not in Sicily.

"What is that across the way?" he asked her, pointing.

She knew what he meant. "A ruin. Not important."

His guidebook had said nothing about ruins in Monte Saturno. So far as he knew there was nothing of that sort here, neither Greek, Roman, Byzantine, nor Norman, none of the multitudinous layers upon layers of superimposed realities out of which this island was built. He had stopped here last night simply because he had had a late start out of Palermo and decided en route not to risk driving on into Piazza Armerina after dark on this rough country road. It had been pure luck that the town's one trattoria maintained a few upstairs rooms for tourists passing through.

"A church of some sort, is it?"

"Of some sort, yes. Not Catholic. A Greek church, the Orthodox faith. Empty a long time. Not a holy place any more."

"Empty how long?"

A shrug. "A long time?"

*This was
a dizzying place,
the taint of
antiquity, the
unfathomable
mysteries lurking
in every narrow
alleyway, behind
every crumbling
facade.*

"Five hundred years? A thousand?"

"Who knows? But a long time. It is very ruined. Nobody goes there except goats. And young innamorati. You know, lovers looking for a place to be alone."

Gardiner felt a slow stirring of excitement.

"A Greek church," he said slowly. "Byzantine, you mean?"

"That may be," Serafina laughed. "Ah, you think there are mosaics there? You think you have made a great artistic discovery? There is nothing. Dirt. Ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"It is very haunted there. Yes."

She sounded almost serious. He had, for a moment, a sense that a door had opened into a dark place forever inaccessible to him and Serafina was standing on the far side of the threshold. He knew that many of the villagers here lived on the interface between modern civilization and that shadowy realm of antiquity that was beyond his understanding; but Serafina, he had thought, was entirely of his world. He saw now that he might have been wrong about that. But then she grinned and was a contemporary woman again.

He said, forcing a grin of his own, "I'd be interested in seeing it, haunted or not. Is there any way of getting to it?"

"A road. Very bad, very rough."

"Could you take me there? I very much would like to have a look at it."

Anger flashed like summer lightning in her eyes. "Ah, you are so subtle, you inglesii!"

"American," he said. And then, comprehending: "And you misunderstand me, if you think I'm trying in some roundabout fashion to engineer a rendezvous with you. Lei capisce, 'rendezvous'?" She nodded. "But as long as I'm here — a Byzantine church that isn't even in the guidebook —"

Another eyeflash, this one more mischievous. She still seemed angry, but in a different way now.

"Truly, Professore, you are interested only in the architecture of this dirty abandoned church? You take me to this rendezvous for lovers merely to see stone walls? Ah, I think I misjudge the kind of man you are. A beautiful woman means nothing to you, I think."

Gardiner sighed. He was caught in a no-win situation. Bluntness seemed the best tactic.

"They mean a great deal. And you are extremely beautiful. But I know better than to proposition a Siciliana five minutes after I've met her, and in any case there's a bed in my hotel room, if that's what I was after. I don't need to take you to an abandoned building full of goatshit and straw. But I would like to see the church. Honestly."

Serafina's expression softened. She looked merely amused now.

"You want to go?" she said. "Really? Allora. We go, then." She snapped her fingers under his nose. "Come! Up! We get ready, we go, at once, subito!"

BUT OF COURSE THEY DIDN'T GO SUBITO. Nothing ever happened subito in Sicily. They had to prepare themselves properly for the expedition, sturdy boots, jackets to ward off brambles and wide-brimmed hats for the sun, plus a bottle of wine, some bread and cheese and salami and fruit, as if they were going on a long journey, not just down the side of one nearby hill and up another. The preparations mysteriously stretched on for hours. He had a suitable jacket and even a hat but no hiking boots, only sneakers, which Serafina glanced at with contempt. Her cousin Gino would lend him a pair of boots.

Cousin Gino was twenty-three or so, sullenly handsome, a swarthy, bull-necked bushy-haired man with enormous forearms and bright, fierce eyes, unexpectedly blue in this land of dark-eyed people. Though Gardiner was a big man himself, broad-shouldered and ruggedly athletic of build, who looked more like a football coach

than an assistant professor of the history of art, it appeared likely to him that in any kind of fight Gino would twirl him around his wrist like spaghetti. And just now Gino was glowering at Gardiner with what looked very much like unconcealed hostility, bringing to mind all of Gardiner's stereotyped notions of the way the men of this island defended their women's chastity. Serafina said something to him in the transmogrified and deformed dialect of Italian, both clipped and slurred, that was Sicilian — a patois which Gardiner found utterly opaque. Gino, replying with an equally unintelligible stream of brusque, sputtering words, gave them both a furious glare and went whirling away from them.

"What's bothering him?" Gardiner asked, still inventing Gino's proprietary rage, imagining dire warnings, threats of vendetta.

"He says your feet are too big, they will stretch his boots."

"That's all?" Gardiner felt something close to disappointment. "Well, tell him not to worry. If anything, his feet look bigger than mine."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. He will get the boots anyway, he said. As a special favor for me. We are very good friends, Gino and I."

The image came unbidden to Gardiner's mind of Serafina and her brutish cousin, over there across the gorge one languid summer night seven or eight years ago, lying naked in each other's arms, ferociously entwined in the incestuous embraces that he assumed were altogether customary among the rural adolescents of this backward country. He doubted that any such thing had ever happened between them; but if it had, no wonder Gino was pissed off over her taking this stranger to their special place, and in his own best boots, yet.

Gardiner smiled at his own foolishness. He was capable of engineering an ethnic cliché for any occasion. It was a habit, he told himself, that he needed to break.

Eventually Gino came back with a pair of huge clodhoppers dangling from one immense hand. To Gardiner's surprise, and apparently Gino's, the boots were a perfect fit.

It was a little before noon when they finally set out. The sun filled half the sky, blazing like a permanent atomic explosion, and the hot, shimmering air was full of madly dancing bugs that sang manic droning songs in his ears. There was a sort of a road at first, but it morphed into a narrow untidy trail after a few hundred yards and then, a little while later, became nothing more than a faint exiguous track through the dry stiff-branched chaparral.

Despite the heat and the difficulties of the route, long-legged Serafina set a brisk pace. Gardiner kept up with her without much effort, but he was marinating in his own sweat under the jacket that she had insisted he wear. At the bottom of the Monte Saturno side of the gorge they came to a campsite, a flat rock and a fire-pit and enough discarded wine bottles to keep future archaeologists amused for centuries, and she said crisply, "We make the lunch here."

"Va bene." He welcomed the break. The climb ahead looked formidable.

Serafina assembled sandwiches while he opened the wine. As they ate and drank she offered snippets of autobiography. She had lived here until she was sixteen, she told him, and then was taken away to Rome by her uncle, not the same one who owned the trattoria, to be educated. There was a bit of extra spin about the way she said "uncle" and "educated," and Gardiner flamboyantly hypothesized all manner of sinister iniquities, some wealthy waxed-mustachioed stranger buying the beautiful girl from her impoverished parents to be put to the most depraved uses in his elegant baroque apartment overlooking the Spanish Stairs. But she talked instead of learning English at a genteel Roman academy whose name meant nothing to Gardiner but sounded quite elite; then a stint in the Roman office of a big British investment bank; an affair, apparently, with a young British bond trader that brought her a transfer to the London office, a dizzying taste of the international high life, and, so she appeared to be saying, the inevitable accidental pregnancy and concomitant mess, letdown, and heartbreak. Her fair-haired bond trader operated out of Prague now and she, having had her fill of banking, worked at the Hertz Rent-a-Car office in Palermo. She was

fluent in English, French, Spanish, and German, as well as Italian and the local dialect. So much for her being a simple peasant girl, he thought. He guessed that she was around twenty-nine. He was nine years older. In the thick afternoon warmth the aura of her lean sleek Mediterranean attractiveness expanded into the hazy air around him, dazzling and mesmerizing him, enveloping him in an unexpected and astonishing explosion of impulsive speculation. How it would startle everyone at the college, Gardiner told himself, if he came back from his summer research trip not only with material for his thesis but with a beautiful and cosmopolitan Italian wife!

"Andiamo," she said, the moment the bottle was empty. "Now I show you the fabulous Byzantine church."

The hill on the southern side of the gorge was steep, all right, and the heat was unthinkable now, and Serafina moved with jackrabbit energy up the slope, as though deliberately testing his endurance; but, fortified by the good red wine of Monte Saturno and his own implacable curiosity about the ruin ahead and now, also, this absurd but amusing new bit of romantic fancy of his, he matched her step for step, a couple of yards behind her with his gaze fixed steadily on the taut, tantalizing seat of her jeans.

Suddenly they were in a little scraggly clearing, and the ruined church lay right in front of them.

"Ecco," she said. "Behold your heart's desire."

The building was a little one, no bigger than a garage and half concealed in tangles of brush, but it was pure late-Byzantine in form, a squared-off Greek cross of a structure with a squat dome perched atop its four blocky walls. He knew of no other building of this sort in Sicily. It reminded him of nothing so much as the eleventh-century church at Daphni, outside Athens. But Daphni was world-famous for its luminous mosaics.

It was impossible, Gardiner thought, that mosaics like those of Daphni could have gone unnoticed all this time, even in this obscure hilltop village.

"Let's go in," he said hoarsely.

"Sì, sì." She beckoned to him. "Venga di qua."

The main entrance was sealed by a dense barrier of interwoven woody shrubs, but a smaller door stood slightly ajar on the northern side, a crudely made wooden one, cracked and crazed, that looked as though it had been tacked on about a hundred years ago by some farmer using this place as a barn. Serafina, with a surprising show of strength, levered it open just far enough to let them slip inside.

The church was rank, musty, dismal, a claustrophobe's nightmare. When Gardiner switched on his flashlight he saw that over the centuries enough sandy dirt had blown in through the narrow windowgrates and through crevices in the walls to lift the floor level at least eight feet in most places, so that he was standing practically within arm's reach of the dome. Heaps of ancient mildewed straw were piled everywhere; a barn, yes. The pungent aroma of innumerable copulations hovered in the air. For how many generations had the passionate young of Monte Saturno committed sins of the flesh in this bedraggled former house of God?

He aimed his beam upward, praying that he would see the stark somber face of Christ the Pantocrator scowling down at him, as at Daphni and other Byzantine churches. No. The dome was bare. He had not really expected anything else. Probably this had been some simple chapel for wayfarers, in use for perhaps fifty years a thousand years ago, then abandoned, forgotten.

"You are satisfied?" Serafina asked.

"I suppose."

"I myself parted with my virtue here," she said, in a bold, cool, self-mocking tone. He looked at her, taken aback, angered and repelled by her unsolicited revelation. The idea that Serafina had ever engaged in any sexual event in this grim squalid place was sickening to him. She and some clumsy village Romeo sprawling on a scratchy tick-infested blanket, his shaggy eager body pressing down on hers, her splendid slender legs spraddled wide, toes pointed at the dome: the thrusts, the grunts, the gasps. "I was fifteen. We thought we were being very brave coming here, because of the

ghosts. But every young couple in town is brave like that when the time comes. Some things are so urgent that even ghosts are unimportant. The ghosts must be defied."

Gardiner shook his head. "Ghosts?" he muttered, roaming the edges of the building, scuffing at the mounded straw. That door into the unknown opening again. This damned island, he thought: level after level of superstition, evil, and madness. You were forever toppling down through the detritus of all its many occupiers to the jolting incomprehensibilities beneath.

He was no good at dealing with such stuff. It forever amazed him when he came running up against some apparently rational person's firmly held belief in the irrational, the impossible, the altogether inexplicable. For Gardiner there was nothing inexplicable, only phenomena that had not yet been properly explained; anything that seemed to be truly and eternally inexplicable was, he suspected, something that had either been badly misinterpreted or had simply never in fact occurred.

He prodded and kicked at the ground along the perimeter of the building with the tip of Gino's boot. "Who was the lucky boy?" he asked, after a time, amazed at himself for keeping the distasteful subject open.

"Does it matter?" she said. "His name was Calogero. He is dead now."

"I'm sorry," said Gardiner automatically. He continued to kick and scuff. Then came a surprise. "Hold on. What's this?"

A forehead of glistening tile was showing along the wall, just at the debris line. He dropped to his knees and scabbled at it, hurling handfuls of sand behind him. Other things came into view. Eyebrows. Eyes. A serene face, nearly complete; a halo. He trembled. There was a mosaic here after all.

IT IS NOT EASY TO BELIEVE," SHE SAID, AS THEY MADE their way wearily back to town at dusk after a long breathless afternoon of clearing away debris. "All those years, and those beautiful things on the wall, and no one ever thought to look under the dirt, until you." Gardiner barely heard her. He was lost in a feverish dream of academic triumph. There would be articles in the journals; there would be a book; he would wait to his doctorate. The mosaics were not of the first rank, hardly that, but they were undeniably late-Byzantine, a continuous band of them that circled the walls just below the surface of the intrusive fill, saints and pilgrims and Biblical figures in bright, intense reds and greens and golds and blacks. The tesserae, the bits of colored glass out of which the mosaic patterns were fashioned, were large and crude and not always perfectly fitted together — this was not Monreale or Cefalù, not Ravenna's San Vitale, not the Keriye Djami in Istanbul — and the figures were awkward and often poorly arranged; but there was a purity about them, an innocence, that made them very beautiful in their own less sophisticated manner.

Schemes, plans, were swiftly unfolding now. He would use his meager funds to hire workmen in town; he would clear out all the fill; he would photograph, he would analyze, he would compare and contrast, he would publish, he would publish, he would publish —

As he and Serafina entered the town's central piazza Gardiner saw that the entire population had turned out, making the nightly promenade, families moving in clustered groups, old men walking arm in arm, young couples holding hands. Some glanced at them, smiling. It seemed to him that everyone was remarking knowingly on their dusty, sweaty look, speculating vividly, lubriciously, on what they had been up to all afternoon in the church across the gorge. And not one with any idea of the truth.

Gardiner had been thinking of inviting her into the trattoria for a celebratory dinner, candles and a fine bottle of red Regealeali riserva with the meal, and then, perhaps, a night of glorious celebratory delights upstairs: All the way back, he had seen that as a natural and inevitable sequel to the day's triumphant events. But here in

town he perceived instantly the impossibility of any such thing. Sweep her grandly into the inn with everybody watching, his carnal notions as manifest to all as if he had exposed himself in the street, and she not to be seen again until morning? Hardly. Whatever destiny awaited him with this woman, and Gardiner was convinced now that some sort of destiny did, it would not be consummated in this tiny and hermetic village. Not tonight, at any rate, virtually in public, as it were.

She appeared to have figured all that out long before him. "Well," she said, hardly pausing a moment outside the little inn before turning away, "I congratulate you on your good fortune. I am happy to have been of service." She touched the tips of her fingers to his, and then she was gone, walking in long strides across the piazza to greet a pair of hatchet-faced old women who were clad in the traditional somber costume of an earlier era.

There was no bath in his room, only a washbasin. Gardiner stripped, quickly splashed himself clean, lay down on the creaking bed to reflect on the day's achievement and perhaps enjoy a little repose. Instantly he was asleep. When he woke, with a start, it was past ten. He dressed hastily. As he descended the stairs, he met someone coming upward, a sturdy-looking, black-bearded, youngish man in a priest's black robe, who smiled and saluted him when they passed each other. So the albergo had acquired a new guest during the day. Two guests at once: a booming tourist season for them, Gardiner supposed.

The padrona was in the dining room, reading a newspaper. She seemed untroubled by his tardiness, and immediately went about putting together dinner for him, pasta with sardines, some roasted pork, a carafe of the red vino di casa. "It was a good day for you?" she asked.

"Fine. Splendid." His glow could leave no doubt.

"You stay here tomorrow?"

"Certainly. Even past tomorrow."

This time, when he settled down on his bed again after dinner, sleep was impossible for a long time. He stared up at the low fly-specked ceiling and saw mosaics on the screen of his wearied mind, stylized mosaic figures, angels, patriarchs, sheep, frolicking dogs. It was too good to be true: much too good. Perhaps he had imagined the whole thing. The heat, the wine, the enchanting proximity of Serafina—

No. No. No. No. They had really been there. His discovery, his mosaics. He had touched them with his own hands. Felt their smooth shining surfaces.

He slept, finally. It was a night of strange frightening dreams, masked figures dancing around him as he lay strapped to a smoldering pyre in the middle of the piazza.

At nine he awakened, breakfasted downstairs on cheese and figs and rolls, and peered out into the town square, which was utterly empty except for a couple of elderly dogs. He had no idea where Serafina was and felt uncomfortable about asking; and in any case he and she had made no arrangements for today. He equipped himself with his hat, his jacket, and Gino's ponderous boots, and tucked a bottle of wine from the display on the dining room table into his backpack, along with enough rolls and cheese and fruit to last him through lunch, and, armed with flashlight, notebook, camera, went capering off alone toward the ravine.

HE DUG ALL MORNING, USING AS HIS SHOVEL A SLAB OF GRAY SLATE that was lying in the clearing outside the church. As the layer of

loose fill retreated, and he laid bare more and more of the band of mosaic ornament that rimmed the walls, Gardiner grew increasingly excited by his find. The work was on the crude side, yes, but it had a raw power that marked it as an important stylistic move in its own right. The background in particular was an intense bluish-white, giving the newly exposed parts of the wall a fierce brilliance that flamed wondrously as the sun came slanting in occasionally through the narrow windows and the cracks in the dome, fading when it moved along. Each moment of brightness was the occasion for a hasty flurry of photographs, and soon all his film was gone. It was a giddy, magical few hours.

He postulated some tenth or eleventh-century craftsman traveling down from Palermo, perhaps to do a job of interior decoration at some baron's palazzo along the island's south shore, being inveigled on route into spending a few weeks

touching up this little chapel. And really getting into it, seeing it as an opportunity to experiment with an individual style of work, perhaps slipping into a little romantic entanglement with one of the town girls that gave him motivation to linger a little while longer, now a real labor of love, so that months went by, maybe even a year or two of solitary toil, preparing the little colored cubes and painstakingly mortaring them into place, his own private masterpiece. All too soon to be forgotten, the building allowed to go derelict, a habitation for donkeys, the brilliant mosaics covered in time by an accretion of wind-blown rubble many feet deep.

There was more than a thesis to be had here. There was an entire scholarly reputation.

At midday, unable to move another molecule of dirt, Gardiner slipped outside into the stupefying heat for his wine and cheese. As soon as he had finished, sleep came over him, in an instant, as though a thick velvet curtain had been dropped on him.

Awakening just as instantly some ninety minutes later, he went back into the church and beheld something so bewildering that his mind could not at first encompass it, and he thought he might still be dreaming. But he knew that he had to be awake. The evidence of physical sensation was compelling. The heavy, shimmering, almost tangible air, the penetrating heat, the myri-

ad of musty pungent smells left behind by vanished centuries: all of that was too vividly real.

And the mosaics had undergone a bizarre transformation. The saints had grown leering faces with forked tongues, and their haloes glowed and pulsed with a neon fury. The peasants tending their flocks had been rearranged into obscene configurations, and looked back jeeringly over their shoulders at him while buggering bat-winged monstrosities. Placid sheep and bounding dogs had been replaced by grotesque reptilian horrors. Colors everywhere clashed garishly.

Impossible.

Impossible.

There was no conceivable explanation for this. Gardiner was shaken, stunned. He felt physically ill. A wild vertigo assailed him. Numbled, half dazed, his heart racing wildly, he backed out of the building, cautiously returned, looked again. Monsters, nightmares, abominations. Frightful sights, all. But what frightened him more than the ghastliness on the walls was the feeling of utter destabilization that whirled through him, the sense that his mind had lost its moorings. He had never experienced any kind of dislocation like this. Never.

He fought himself into calmness. It must be the heat, Gardiner

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told himself carefully. He had to be hallucinating. His photographs would show the truth.

With unsteady hands he lifted his camera, remembering only after the shutter's first click that he had used up all his film. He shrugged. For a long moment he stood staring at the hideous things on the walls.

All I need now, he thought, is for one of them to wink at me.

All I need —

Abruptly all his hard-won calmness dissolved and something close to panic overcame him.

Turning, he fled down the side of the gorge, ran with superhuman energy up the far side into town, arriving panting and dizzied, and found Serafina on the porch of her grandparents' decrepit old stone house behind the post office. "Come with me," he said. "The mosaics — I was just there, and they looked all changed. You've got to come and tell me it isn't so."

"Changed?"

"Into something horrible. Monsters and demons all over the wall. I couldn't believe it."

"Ah," she said, smiling amiably, a calm knowing smile as old as Zeus. "So the ghosts are at work."

Gardiner felt a shiver run along his back. The ghosts, again.

"It was the ghosts, yes," he said harshly. "Or the heat making me crazy. Or something I ate. Whatever it is, you've got to go back there with me. To check those mosaics out with your own eyes. I need to prove to myself that I didn't actually see what I saw. Will you come? Right now?"

She hesitated only a beat. "Yes," she said, still looking more amused than anything else. "Of course."

This time he led the way. It was the hottest part of the afternoon; but Gardiner was in the grip of a crazy adrenaline surge, and moved so quickly that Serafina was hard pressed to match his speed.

He entered the church first and switched on his flashlight, bracing himself for the worst. But what he saw were the scenes he had uncovered that morning. Benign golden-haloed saints, looking back at him with gazes of sappy medieval sanctity. Smiling dull-eyed shepherds stood amidst their patient sheep. Innocent dogs performed mindless leaps. He was limp with relief.

Serafina, following him in, glanced around at the mosaics, and said, smiling, "Yes, well, so tell me: where are all these horrible things?"

Gardiner peered at the walls, baffled.

"I swear, Serafina, I was absolutely certain that they were there. A completely convincing hallucination, as real as — as real as these walls. The saints had turned into demons. The farm animals had become monsters. The colors —"

She gave him a queer look. "You drank a whole bottle of wine with your lunch, yes? And slept in the sun. And then you dreamed. Ah, yes, yes, caro, a very bad dream. Which the oh-so-devilish ghosts of this place playfully put into your sleeping mind to perplex you. Look, look, there are no monsters here. It would be a good story if there were, but there are not. They are very pretty, your mosaics, I think."

Yes, yes, they were. Gentle scenes, lovely, innocuous.

Perplexed indeed, altogether lost in bewilderment, Gardiner said almost nothing while they trudged back to town. Already that panoply of monsters was becoming unreal to him. But what he could not put aside was his conviction that he had, at least for a

moment, truly seen those things with his own sober eyes, though he knew, knew, that it was impossible that he had.

As they came up the path into the piazza Serafina said, "You should take the Greek priest over to see the church. He will find it a very exciting surprise."

"Who?"

"Father Demetrios. He is Eastern Orthodox, of the Martorana church in Palermo. He is visiting here since yesterday."

Gardiner recalled, now, the other guest at the hotel, the black-bearded young priest of the night before.

An Orthodox priest, though? The Greek rite? All thoughts of ghosts and monsters, and of his own possibly wobbling sanity, fled from Gardiner at once. He was seized by sudden overmastering practical fear. The priest, if he found out about the mosaics, would surely claim the derelict church on behalf of his sect and take control of any scholarly use of the art within it. Gardiner would be shut out, his rights of discovery overridden by the assertion of the higher right of prior ownership.

"No," he said. "I'd rather not show the mosaics to anybody just yet. You haven't already told him about them, have you?"

"No," she said, "of course not."

Was she telling the truth? There was something almost petulant about that of course, and something ambivalent about the shake of the head.

The town square was deserted. The villagers were still enjoying their siesta, the whole town torpid in the late-day heat. Serafina accompanied him as far as the porch of his inn, and lingered there a moment, long enough for him to wonder whether he should invite her upstairs. But even now, with no one to spy on them, it felt somehow inappropriate, even sordid, to make such an overture to her out of the blue. Their frantic jog over to the ruin had hardly been a proper romantic prelude, and his strange hallucination, his babbling account of imagining that he had witnessed a demonic transformation of the mosaics, left him feeling abashed and demeaned now. He offered no invitation.

"Well, then, ciao, amico. I will be seeing you," she added formally, and turned away.

Was that a touch of disappointment in her tone? So it seemed to him, for a moment. But

it was too late to call her back. Already, moving swiftly as always, she was halfway across the piazza.

Gardiner went to his room, rinsed himself perfunctorily, unloaded his camera and buried the roll of film deep in his suitcase. For a long time he sat by his fly-specked window, staring into the square below, pondering many strangenesses. It was half past seven, now; the day was cooling, the townsfolk were coming forth for their pre-dinner stroll.

Without warning a desperate reckless desire to see the mosaics again, to confirm the reality of them, overcame him. He seized his camera and in a few minutes found himself once more laboring down the now-familiar path into the gorge.

In the grayness of early evening he saw what he took to be bats flitting about the little domed church. Brushing impatiently past them, Gardiner marched inside, grim-faced, and cast his flashlight beam on the walls.

The mosaics were in nightmare mode again. Everything was fangs, claws, tentacles, jutting swollen penises, jagged blurs of discordant color.

He felt like sobbing. Why did the damned things keep oscillating in this maddening way? Why couldn't they keep to one form or the other?

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"Serafina!" he howled, as if expecting her to be able to hear him across the canyon. "It's happened again!"

This time he had had no wine. The day's heat had relented. He believed himself to be sane. What explanation could there be for this?

There was none. He was staring into the abyss of the incomprehensible.

Waves of nausea went sweeping through him. He was trembling, and his teeth were chattering, which was something he could not remember having experienced ever before, that convulsive spastic movement of his jaws, that terrible eerie clacking of his teeth. He steadied himself with an immense effort. This must be recorded, he thought. Yes. Yes. Aiming his camera at the ghastliest of the designs, Gardiner pressed and pressed again, but the flash attachment would not operate. He had no idea why. Fear gave way to rage. He spat, slapped the camera, pressed once more. Nothing. Fumblingly he took some photos by flashlight illumination alone, knowing they would never come out.

He gave the things on the wall one long last hard look. Then he turned and ran from the building, struggling at every step through the tangled knots of brambles that blocked the path and were so much harder to see, this late in the day. He moved like a machine, never pausing. A void had taken possession of his mind; it was empty now of all thought, all speculation. He dared not even try to think.

Darkness had fallen when he entered the town. His legs were aching mercilessly from the uphill run. His powerful thighs, of which he was so proud, the product of endless miles of dawn jogging, throbbed with pain. As he rounded the corner by the museum, a figure stepped out of the shadows and struck him a terrible blow in the stomach. His eyeglasses went flying. Astounded, Gardiner staggered back, doubling over, gagging and choking and reeling, though in some reflexive way he managed to put his fists up anyway to ward off another punch.

It was Gino, Serafina's cousin. He loomed over Gardiner, swollen with wrath, rocking from side to side as he prepared his next swing. His blue eyes were ablaze with rage. Gardiner slapped at the balled fist confronting him.

"Hey, hold it," he said. "I'll give you back your goddamn boots, if that's what you want."

"It is not the boots," said Gino venomously, speaking remarkably precise Italian now. He swung again. Gardiner pivoted so that he took the punch on the meaty part of his left arm instead of in the middle of his chest. It went through him like a bolt of electricity.

He could not remember when he had last been in a fist-fight: not since he was twelve, most likely. But he was no weakling. He would fight back, if he had to. Automatically he dropped into a boxer's crouch and weave, and when Gino swung again he ducked and threw a punch of his own, which Serafina's cousin batted away with a contemptuous swipe, as though he were swatting at a mosquito. Gino's next punch caught Gardiner just below his right clavicle, landing with thunderbolt force and sending him sprawling to the ground.

Through a mist of pain and humiliation he became aware that Serafina had emerged from somewhere and was pounding her fists furiously against Gino's chest. "Pazzo!" she cried. "Cretino! Imbecile!"

"Tell him I'm finished with his precious boots," Gardiner muttered feebly.

"The boots are not the issue," she said, in English. "He is enraged because you have not slept with me. Because you have rejected me two nights twice."

Gardiner, still on the ground, gaped. "What the hell are you saying? I thought Sicilian men were supposed to defend the honor of their women, not to —"

"It is because he thinks you think you are too good for me. He wants you to take me to bed, and then he will make you marry me, and you will settle a fortune on the entire family, because you are American and Americans are rich. In his mind it is my job to seduce

you. In this, he believes, I have failed, and so he is angered." Serafina extended her hand to Gardiner and pulled him to his feet. "Angered with you," she said, "not me. Of me he is afraid." She turned to Gino, standing to one side like a fettered ox, and unleashed on him a torrent of fiery Sicilian. Gardiner was unable to understand a word of it. When at last she fell silent, Gino went slinking wordlessly away into the night.

"Come," she said, picking up Gardiner's glasses and handing them to him. Still befogged, he put them in his shirt pocket. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Nothing broken. Only bent."

She led him into the albergo, pausing at the bar to pick up a bottle of grappa. Upstairs, in his room, she poured a drink for him, helped him get his backpack off, gently probed his chest and shoulders for damage. "You will live," she said, and measured out some grappa for herself. "Gino is very stupid, but he means well. I apologize on his behalf." Then, with a sly smile: "You are much more handsome without your glasses, Professor. A strong face, like a Roman emperor, hard, virile. All beveled planes and stony angles. The glasses destroy your face completely, do you know?" She was wearing a thin green cardigan and a flimsy purple skirt, and now she began to unbutton the cardigan. "You do not have to marry me, only to be nice," she said. "You went to the mosaics again tonight?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"What I saw — it makes no sense, Serafina. They'd gone all strange again." He felt abashed even to say such a thing. "I'm sorry. That's how they were."

"The ghosts have you in their grip," she said. "I am sorry for you for that. But come. Lie down with me. You want to, don't you?" She was narrow through the hips and small-bottomed, not at all Italian that way, and her arms and shoulders were almost distressingly thin, but her breasts were agreeably full. They stayed in his room for two hours. The bed was too small for two, and creaked loudly enough to be heard all over town, but they coped, and coped well. In the close humid atmosphere of the little room Gardiner forgot entirely the pain of Gino's punches and, in Serafina's arms, even for a time succeeded in exorcising the nightmarish threat to his sense of his own sanity that his most recent visit to the ruined church had awakened in him.

Afterward they went downstairs. The padrone and his wife appeared to have gone to sleep, but Serafina went into the kitchen of the trattoria and put together a dinner for the two of them out of whatever she could find there, some leftover pasta with anchovies and a cold shoulder of lamb and a platter of broiled tomatoes and garlicky mushrooms, along with what was left in several open bottles of wine. When they had eaten Gardiner asked her to go back up to his room with him again, but this time she declined with a polite smile, explaining it would not be wise for her to stay the night with him. "Until tomorrow," she said. "And you should not go to the church again alone. Buona notte, caro." Blew him a fingertip-kiss and was gone.

This has been a very weird day, Gardiner thought.

IN THE MORNING, AS HE WAS FINISHING BREAKFAST, Serafina appeared at the albergo and said, "Let us make another visit to your mosaics. I still would like to see them, these horrors of yours."

"Most likely they'll have changed back overnight," Gardiner said, almost jauntily. "But let's go anyway." He realized that he was becoming obsessed by the improbability of all this: an encounter with the absurd, his very first. There was a certain charm to its very inexplicability, even. But behind the charm lay something truly scary that would not relinquish its hold on him: the terrifying possibility that the hinges of his mind had begun to loosen. It was either that or ghosts; and he had never been very successful at believing in ghosts.

He was stiff and sore, not only from Gino's onslaught but from all

of yesterday's runnings to and fro, and Serafina had to pause several times to wait for him to catch up as they crossed the valley. But at last they were at the church. "Let me go in first," he said grandly, which brought the sly knowing smile from her once again. She waved him forward.

He expected everything to be normal again, that they would see nothing more than gentle pastoral scenes. But no — no, almost with gratitude he saw that the walls of the chapel this morning were still full of terrifying hideosities. But they were different ones from last night's. Today's carnival of abominations featured savage carnivorous things with rows of red glaring eyes, extraterrestrial-looking spindly-headed satyrs in full spate, pious pilgrims with melting slimy faces. Hieronymus Bosch on acid. He was surprised at how little dismay he felt. He was becoming almost resigned to these metamorphoses, he thought. The trick was not to search for explanations. "Take a look," he called hoarsely to her. She came in and stood for a moment by his side as he shined his beam here and there and there. He heard her soft little gasp: Plainly she had not really expected to see the things that she was seeing here now. She slipped her arm through his and pressed close against him, shivering. When he attempted once more to take photographs, the flash attachment again refused to function.

"This is the work of demons," Serafina said, in a tone an octave deeper than normal. "Andiamo! Fuori!" They went swiftly outside. With a visibly shaky hand she crossed herself three times. All that bally cosmopolitan pizazz had been stripped from her in an instant; she was a country girl again, and a terrified one. "You should tell Father Demetrios about this right away," she said. Her eyes were wide rigid disks.

"Why?"

"This church formerly belonged to his faith. It is his responsibility to drive these things away."

"To — drive them away —?"

She was talking about an exorcism, this very modern young Sicilian woman. Gardiner stared. Moment by moment he could feel himself being drawn backward into the opaque, inscrutable medieval past.

She said, as though explaining to a child, "You and I both saw saints and shepherds here yesterday afternoon, but in the morning and the evening, alone, you saw monsters. This morning, the monsters are still there, and now I see them too. So we are both hallucinating or else it is real, and I do not think we are hallucinating. It is easier for me to believe in demons than in shared hallucinations."

"I suppose."

"Look, strange things have occurred in this church for many years. Although not like this, not that I have ever heard. It is a serious thing, this deception in a place that once was holy. If nothing is done to cure it, who can say what harm might befall to others who come here?"

"Let me think about all this a little."

"What is there to think?"

The unreality of it all was overwhelming. But Gardiner struggled to keep things in a practical perspective. "I can't predict what might happen to the mosaics once Father Demetrios knows about them. Suppose he insists on destroying them? I found them, Serafina. They're important to me."

"This is my village, caro. It is important to me."

Gardiner had no answer for that. He had no answers for any of this.

They returned to town in silence. Serafina grew perceptibly less tense the farther they got from the ruined church, as though they were returning not from a searing glimpse into the pit but only from some spooky horror film, and by the time they entered the village she was her familiar lively self again, whistling, joking, walking with easy free strides. "We will go to see Father Demetrios now, all right?" she said. "He will be at the cathedral, with Father Giuseppe, I think. They are great friends, Father Demetrios and Father Giuseppe. Father Demetrios comes here every few months to play chess with him, and to argue doctrinal matters, whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son, and

matters like that which will never be settled if they argue about them for ten million years."

"Does that mean Father Giuseppe will have to be told about the mosaics too?" Gardiner asked.

"No. No. This matter is not the business of his church, only of the Greek Orthodox people. Let Father Demetrios handle it. If we tell Father Giuseppe, we will have the Pope here by next Tuesday, and the reporters and the television people, and everybody else. Look, here is Father Demetrios now." She pointed across the piazza toward the pathetic little cathedral, the only badly designed one Gardiner had ever seen, a shallow-vaulted asymmetrical structure fashioned from rough-hewn blocks of dark stone ineptly fitted together. "He is very sexy, I think, Father Demetrios," said Serafina slyly, giving Gardiner a playful nudge. "It is a great waste, a man like that in the priesthood. Come." He was swept along in her wake, unable to protest.

FATHER DEMETRIOS WAS GARBED IN BLACK from head to toe, even now in the blowtorch blast of midday heat: cylindrical flat-topped black hat, long high-collared black robe sweeping down to shining black shoes. A heavy golden cross lay on his breast, its upper half vanishing into the dense coils of his long, thick, square-cut beard. He was about thirty-five, a handsome man, stocky and deep-chested, youthfully vigorous, with glossy, intelligent eyes buried in networks of little precocious wrinkles.

"The building has a bad history," he said, speaking in passable English, over a cold bottle of white wine at the trattoria, when Gardiner had finished telling his tale. "I myself have never entered it. The mosaics, be they holy or otherwise, are a surprise to me. But the tradition is that a murder was done there, a priest struck down by a furious Norman knight. It was then deconsecrated. You will take me there now?"

"The road is very bad, father," Serafina said, indicating the priest's flowing robe, his gleaming shoes.

He grinned broadly. "No problem," he said, and winked. Sexy, yes. Gardiner could see that. "I will be right back." He went up to his room and returned quickly in khaki trousers, a light windbreaker over a T-shirt, and sturdy boots. All that remained of his clerical garb was the cross and the black cylindrical hat.

When they reached the church, Gardiner made as though to enter first, but Father Demetrios asked for the flashlight and waved him aside. Entering the building a step behind Father Demetrios, Gardiner saw that the mosaics had reverted to their original innocuous form: shepherds and patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, the Nativity, the journey to Bethlehem.

"Quite remarkable," said Father Demetrios. "You have photographs of the other state?"

"I tried. The camera flash wouldn't go off."

"That is to be expected. Let us go outside and wait a little while."

For ten minutes they stood in the clearing; then the priest sent Gardiner into the church alone. This time the walls were covered with a wild conglomeration of diabolic filth: a gory massacre, a bestial orgy, a witches' sabbath, and more. He ran to the doorway. "Father! Father! Come and see!" The priest hurried in, followed by Serafina. When Gardiner turned to illuminate the mosaics again, they were as they had been before, pure, holy.

He felt his face flaming. "I swear to you, father —"

"Yes. I understand. They are great masters of roguesy. We will wait once again." But, though they went in and out of the church several times over the next hour, the mosaics were unchanged. They would not revert to the hideous apocalyptic form. Gardiner found that maddening. He wanted to see the demons again, with the priest as witness. He needed to see the demons again.

But the demons would not appear, and finally they gave up. On the way back to town Gardiner studied the priest carefully, won-

dering if the man suspected him of being some kind of lunatic. But Serafina had seen the distorted mosaics too. Thank God for that, he thought. He would be just about ready to sign up with a shrink by now, otherwise.

"I must think profoundly about this," said Father Demetrios, and went to his room. Serafina said she had to go to her grandmother: she told Gardiner she would join him for dinner. Gardiner stood by himself in the empty piazza, watching solid-looking heat-shimmers go spiraling upward. This was the hottest day yet. The town was like an oven.

In late afternoon, unable to bear any of this any longer, Gardiner went back across to the church yet again, and found its walls once more bright with capering loathsomenesses. They no longer frightened him; they simply made him sad. He could weep with the sadness of it all. He had found such lovely sweet mosaics in this unexpected place, such marvels of naive medieval art. Why wouldn't they stay that way? Why did they have to assail him like this, striking at the foundations of his sanity? For a long time he stood swaying in the midst of this den of horrors, looking with distaste and disbelief from scene to scene. The chapel seemed airless in the pounding heat, as though every atom of oxygen had fled from it into the sky.

The figures appeared to be moving. That was a new phenomenon, and an awful one. He blinked at them. His hand quivered as he moved the flashlight beam from place to place. The leering dancers the unthinkable shapes —

Somehow the flashlight fell from his hand, and went out as it hit the ground. Gardiner knelt, groping for it in the stifling darkness. He was unable to find it, nor did he have the strength to make his way out of the church. He simply crouched where he was, kneeling, head downward, wearily resting both his palms on the sandy soil.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. A calm voice: "Let us go outside, my friend," Father Demetrios.

"I fell asleep, I guess," said Gardiner.

"No," said the priest. "Not really."

Father Demetrios had a flashlight of his own, a dim one. Gardiner pointed at the walls. They were still covered with monsters.

"Do you see them?" Gardiner asked raggedly.

"I see them, yes. You wanted to find mosaics here, and you found them, eh? But I think you wanted it a little too hard. This is what happens, when they know you want something too hard."

"When they know? What they? Who?"

"Come," the priest said. "Outside."

Father Demetrios led him from the building and sat him down in the clearing. Dusk had come. Serafina was not there. Gardiner noticed that the priest had placed a number of lighted candles on the ground all about the building. He was taking things from a backpack: a crucifix, a couple of small silver chalices, a Bible.

"Are you going to do an exorcism?" Gardiner asked.

"A re consecration," said Father Demetrios. "I have not the authority to do exorcisms. The effect will be the same, though. You will please say nothing of this to anyone, yes? There is some irregularity in my proceeding on my own this way." He was going about the building, now, anointing it with oil from one of the chalices. "This is all to be our little secret, do we agree?"

Gardiner's head was swimming. He heard the priest chanting in Greek and saw him raising and lowering candles and making the sign of the cross on the walls with the holy oil. It went on and on. Then he knelt a long time in prayer. "We are done," Father

Demetrios said at last. "Let us go back to the village, now."

"Shall we look inside the church, first?" Gardiner asked.

"I think not. Let us simply go."

"No. I have to see," said Gardiner. He took one of the candles out of the ground and used it to light his way.

The walls were as blank as if Father Demetrios had whitewashed them. After a moment's hesitation he put out his forefinger and rubbed. A rough stucco surface; no hint of the smoothness of mosaic tile anywhere. Even in this asphyxiating heat, Gardiner felt a chill spreading over him. This was the last straw, this newest mutation. He knew he had to flee, not just the church but the town itself. There was nothing solid here, only abysses beneath abysses.

He went stumbling out. "There's nothing there, father. An hour ago there were mosaics all over those walls!"

"There were?" Father Demetrios said.

Serafina met him at the hotel and said, "Will we have dinner together tonight?"

"I think not," Gardiner said. "I'm going to leave."

"Leave? Now? But it is already dark, and you have not eaten!"

"That's all right. I think I should go."

"Ah. Do you?"

"This is no place for me. You've got too many different kinds of reality here, I think. A little retreating is in order, a little regrouping. There are other places, other mosaics, elsewhere, you know. Best to try my luck at one of those. A place without any ghosts."

She considered that for a moment. "Yes. Maybe you're right." She gave him a sad smile. "Do you blame me for this, what happened here?"

"You? Why should I blame you?"

"Good," she said. "I would like you to have at least one happy memory of my village."

He thought he saw an unstated appeal in her eyes. "Will I see you again somewhere?" he asked. "In Palermo, maybe? If I ask for you at the Hertz office?"

"You could do that, yes," she said. "Yes. Please do."

They stood a little while together, neither of them speaking. Then she leaned forward and kissed him lightly, a quick brush against his lips, and took his hand and squeezed it, and smiled, not so sadly this time; and then she was gone.

Gardiner went to his room and packed, and found the padrone and settled his bill, and started off down the road, southward into the sultry night, heading for the coast, not daring to look back at dwindling Monte Saturno in his mirror, as though fearing that he would see some titanic winged figure standing with folded arms above the town, grinning at his departure. Was there any place on this island, he wondered, that had no ghosts? Maybe not. But he knew that he needed a change of air. Different ghosts. Less volatile, less mischievous. Relics of an older, cooler realm, one where reason had held sway at least for a little while. Monte Saturno's mysteries had been too much for him — immense, unanswerable.

He reached Agrigento on the southern shore just before dawn. The ancient Agrigento, it was, where the clear-minded, logic-loving old Greeks had built a dozen elegant temples whose austere remains still could be seen. It was cooler, here. A fresh breeze was blowing from the sea. Gardiner felt a measure of steadiness returning. Amidst the clean, stark, tranquil ruins of the calm and rational classical era he watched, with tears of happiness and relief streaming down his face, the sun come up over the shattered columns of the Temple of Olympian Zeus. ♣

*Today's
carnival of
abominations
featured savage
carnivorous
things with rows
of red glaring
eyes, pious pil-
grims with melt-
ing slimy faces.*

As time goes on, greatness passes from the world. Can it be saved for future generations?

THE RIGHT SORT OF FLEA

BY RICHARD PARKS

Illustration by Doug Andersen

It was in the third month after the coming of the great Wurm that the king knew he had to act. It didn't matter that he was old now; thirty winters or more had passed since Hrothgar's Hall had been cleansed. No one else of his people was alive who remembered those deeds, and that time when the king was in his youth. Everyone among the Danes and Scyldings knew what had happened, and nearly as many among the Swedes, but that wasn't the same thing.

It was night. The feasts were over, the servants and thanes alike gone to their beds in the outer buildings. No one slept in the hall now, a tradition begun when Beowulf had returned from Heorot years before. As for Hrothgar's far away hall itself, Grendel's ghost was said to walk there still, though none lived who would admit seeing it.

Beowulf didn't hold with those notions





ANDERSEN

Beowulf stood at the entrance Finding the beast's

himself. He sat almost alone in his own hall and, as was often required of kings, he came to a decision. "There is no one left, Wiglaf," he said at last. "There is only me."

His young kinsman shook his head. "Heroes from all the tribes have come to contest with the monster. More will come."

"All have failed. Shall I wait for more men to die in my place? I saw that burden in Hrothgar's eyes, and it killed him more surely than his age. I would not wish it for myself."

"We should cast the runes," Wiglaf said earnestly.

Beowulf smiled at the young man. He remembered being that young, when his hair was as ruddy red-gold as Wiglaf's, his features unlined, his arms and legs strong and smooth. Now his gold was traded for silver, and the scars of his honor pained him every morning, noon, and night. He was tired in a way that Wiglaf could not understand at his time of life, when all the vines were green and the blood ran hot. But he did remember.

"We will cast the runes," Beowulf agreed. "And then we shall see."

So it was done, but the runes were silent. Wiglaf seemed relieved; as for the king, he drank.

"You disapprove," he said, looking at Wiglaf.

"It's no shame to a man or a king to drink," Wiglaf demurred. "It shows his strength as well as any other contest. But, as there is no one here but me, I fear you drink for other reasons."

Beowulf grunted. "Not to show strength, certainly. Yet I recall a bit of wisdom Hrothgar passed on to me: 'Youth has no stronger foe than drink, nor age a finer friend.'"

Wiglaf frowned. "I don't understand," he said.

"Reach my age and you will." Beowulf said no more until the drink at length persuaded his body to seek the counsel of his bed. He made no sacrifices there, but he did dream, and there he was answered.

"Do you not know me?"

Beowulf stood at the entrance to a cave at one end of a narrow valley. There was a fetid smell on the air, as of brimstone and rotten meat. The trees near the pit had been burned black and every now and then a wisp of smoke escaped the pit; dirty orange flames appeared in the darkness, then subsided.

"No," Beowulf said.

"I am Grendel. Take up your weapons."

"Grendel is dead. I killed him. I delivered Hrothgar's hall from his evil." Even in the dream, there was that much certainty. Beowulf did not claim to be a wise man, but the things he knew he knew very well.

"I am Grendel's fierce mother, raging to avenge her child. Take up your weapons."

"Grendel's dam does not speak. I killed her as I killed her son," Beowulf said. He felt the ghost of his old pride stirring, something he had not felt in a very long time. Being king left little time for such luxuries. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am that which you have not slain," the voice said.

Beowulf looked into the darkness. "You are the great Wurm, full of fire and destruction. You are the evil I have yet to overcome."

A hiss of laughter. "Take up your weapons. Strive with me."

Beowulf nodded, without joy or fear. "I shall. I must."

"This is madness," Wiglaf said. "There's not a one of your thanes who wouldn't face the Wurm in your stead."

"If I fail I imagine they will have to. Or else turn all our lands over to the Wurm and make their sons and daughters meat for his feast.

But somehow I do not think I will fail. Call that pride if you wish. I think it is something else."

Beowulf stood at the entrance to the valley of his dreams. Finding the beast's lair had been easy enough. His armored thanes stood as an honor guard with him, Wiglaf at his side. Beowulf's shield boss shone like a mirror; his mailshirt was new and bordered in gold. He carried the heirloom sword that was his gift from Hrothgar, and his helmet was like the bowl of the sun. He turned to his men.

"This is my duty. If I fall, it will be yours. Remain here for news of me. If I return not by the end of the day, wait no longer."

"Honored king —" his cousin began, but the king stopped him.

"You too, Wiglaf. I have spoken."

Beowulf took his new shield fronted with iron and Wiglaf's spear and marched into the valley. Soon the sight of his men and the valley entrance were behind him. He used the spear as a walking staff, saving what of his strength he could. Beowulf knew that what he was now was nothing compared to what he had been, but his arms remembered, and his sinews, though old, were tough still. It would have to be enough.

WHERE WAS THE SACRIFICE?

The voice was on the wind, as in his dream. It was like a dream itself — clear enough so far as it went, but still hard to understand.

"What sacrifice?" he asked, though there was no one there to ask. ANY SACRIFICE. TO YOUR GODS. TO YOUR ANCESTORS.

DID YOU NOT ASK THEIR BLESSING?

Beowulf shook his head. "No."

WHY NOT?

"The runes have been silent for years. We cast them, for all the good of it. We listen, for all the good of that."

HAVE THE GODS FORGOTTEN HOW TO SPEAK?

"I do not know."

PERHAPS THEY ARE DEAD.

"Perhaps," Beowulf conceded.

I AM BLASPHEMING. DOESN'T THAT ANGER YOU?

"All things die. Even the gods, or so it is said. It might be blasphemy; it might be the truth. I do not know. Do you seek my anger?"

ANGER MAY SERVE. YOU ARE OLD, BEOWULF. I DO NOT KNOW WHAT REMAINS OF THE MAN YOU WERE.

"Who are you? Why do you care what remains of me?"

YOU KNOW WHO I AM. THE REST YOU MUST DISCOVER FOR YOURSELF.

Beowulf did know. He found himself at the entrance to the cave in his dreams; he saw the smoke, felt its sulphurous breath on his face. He blinked away stinging tears to gaze into the red eyes looking back at him from the depths of the pit.

The first roar shook the valley. The second shook the men waiting for their king. They were tried men all, used to battle, respectful of their enemies but afraid of none. What shook the valley was not a man, was nothing they understood. The third quaking was a match for Thor's hammer, shaking the earth before a storm. It was too much. The thanes fled.

All save Wiglaf.

He didn't know why. It was a question he asked himself from time to time from that day forward. Whatever the harpers sang of Wiglaf's courage, it meant little to him. Wiglaf knew himself better than most young men, and he knew his courage was no greater than those who fled. Perhaps even less. All he knew was that he could not run, no matter how much he wanted to. That there was a force at his

to the valley of his dreams. lair had been easy enough.

back, a wall of will greater than his own, and he could not pierce it. Nor could he do nothing; the shame of that was even stronger than his fear. He decided to do the only thing he could do. Wiglaf took up his shield and disobeyed his king.

Beowulf's iron shield was holding, for now. Already his arm was seared by the heat passing through the metal and into the wood and leather backing. Now and then the creature's tongue would dart forward like a frog's, battering at him. Beowulf timed his next sword thrust, stinging the tongue but little more than that. The creature's hiss was as much commendation as pain.

WELL STRUCK. I SEE YOUR TIME UNDER THE CROWN OF THE GEATS HASN'T MADE YOU FORGET ALL OF WHAT IT WAS TO BE A HERO.

Beowulf didn't feel much like a hero, but then he never had. Even with the entire hall of Heorot singing his praises after the death of Grendel. He felt what he remembered then: the weight of shame waiting to fall on him if he failed, or worse, didn't try. The need for honor and reputation that was as much wealth among his people as gold or cattle. With his royal kinship, strength, and natural skills, much had been expected of him and much delivered, first as warrior and then as king. The weight of his responsibilities wore him down as much as the years, and when would it ever be enough?

"Whatever I was, now I am an old man," Beowulf said, his breath ragged. "This is a game for youth."

YOU THINK THIS A GAME? The creature paused its attack, pulling back a bit into the darkness that Beowulf's eyes could barely penetrate without the aid of the dragon's breath.

"Isn't it? The warrior who fights with his arm alone does not live long. The king who does the same reckons his time even shorter. Who called to me in my dreams? Who caused just enough pain among my people that remedy had to come? Whatever your purpose, revenge for what I know not or sport, you are no simple beast."

A hissing sound, almost laughter, came from the creature. Beowulf heard his answer, if such it was, on the wind, in the echoes, inside his brain, or all three at once. IS THERE MORE WIT IN THAT SKULL THAN BONE? PERHAPS I SHALL EMPTY IT OUT AND SEE.

"Or perhaps," Beowulf said, "I will do the same to you. Is this truly all there is to our meeting?" Beowulf was grateful for the respite, but not so grateful for the ease of it. It gave him too much time to feel the ache in his arm, to remember the slash on his shoulder, still bleeding, or the many places burned or bruised all over his body. He stretched slowly, wincing as flashes of pain revealed his hurts.

YOU KNOW PAIN AS AN OLD FRIEND, BEOWULF. DO YOU THINK YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE?

"Speak your mind plainly, dragon. I am but mortal, and my time will not be so very long, with or without your help."

More laughter. IT IS OUR WAY ... WAS. DID YOU KNOW, AMONG DRAGONKIND A SIMPLE GREETING COULD TAKE ALL MORNING? WE ALWAYS GAVE A SITUATION DUE GRAVITY. DOES OUR TIME TOGETHER NOT MERIT AS MUCH AS A GREETING?

Beowulf rested his sword on the edge of his shield, though he watched the creature closely for any signs of movement. "You sound almost like old Hrothgar, when he was long in his cups and speaking of things past. He had regrets, and I hear the same echo in you. What has passed with you, to have so many?"

The red eyes disappeared, but Beowulf heard no scraping of scale on stone, nothing to indicate the great beast had moved. It took him

a moment to realize that the creature's eyes were closed, as if in sleep, or reverie. After a moment the eyes returned.

MORE THAN YOU CAN KNOW, FOR ALL YOUR GUILT. AND EVEN GAMES HAVE AN ENDING.

The dragon stirred, and Beowulf put his sword at guard. "Why did you seek me out?"

WHEN HAD MIDGUARD LAST HEARD OF MY KIN?

Beowulf shrugged. "For myself? Never, other than stories our scopos would sing when they had run out of live heroes to flatter. Grendel and his dam were not such as you."

NO. BUT I DID KNOW THEM. WE WERE PART OF THE SAME THING. CALL IT ENCHANTMENT OR CURSE, WE SHARED IT.

Beowulf smiled grimly. "Then it is revenge you seek."

The dragon hissed, but there was no laughter in it now. Beowulf imagined he could taste its meaning on the air, like a scent. Sorrow? Weariness? It seemed to be all those things, and more beside, more than he could put names to or even count.

NOT REVENGE, BEOWULF. YOU MAY BE OLD AS MEN GO, BUT AS DRAGONS RECKON TIME YOU ARE LITTLE MORE THAN AN EMBER THROWN FROM A FIREPIT, GLOWING AN INSTANT AND THEN GONE. A SUMMER BLOSSOM. There was laughter now. OR A FLEA. YES, THAT IS BETTER. YOU ARE A FLEA, BEOWULF. BUT YOU ARE THE RIGHT SORT OF FLEA, AND THOSE ARE VERY RARE. THAT IS WHY I HAVE SOUGHT YOU OUT.

"I don't understand."

The dragon rose. Its head nearly touched the cavern roof some ten feet above. I SUPPOSE NOT. PREPARE YOURSELF.

The dragon struck, its jaws snapping on the air where Beowulf had been a mere heartbeat before. The pain was constant now, but Beowulf kept moving in a fighter's crouch to the side, then darted in and struck. His sword rang with the force of it like a hammer on an anvil; once more the dragon's scales proved equal to his sword, but this time only just. Beowulf had aimed for the curve of the creature's jaw where it met the neck, where the scales were thinner. He struck a little higher than he'd intended and the blade rebounded, but the dragon screeched flame that Beowulf barely avoided and shook its head as if trying to clear its vision.

KEEP BITING, FLEA. IT IS YOUR NATURE.

"What do you know of that?"

The dragon showed its teeth in what was almost a smile. ARE YOU FOND OF GOLD, LITTLE FLEA?

The dragon's words seems to wander off like silly children, at whim and for little purpose, but Beowulf thought that there was, perhaps, something of meaning in them. Beowulf knew his own strength, and he was coming to know the dragon's. Chances were he would die in this cave no matter how well he fought. Beowulf spared a little of his attention for the chance to find out why. "For itself? No. For its uses? Certainly. Gold is given to reward, taken to punish. A king uses it as a warrior uses axe and sword."

AND THERE'S THE DIFFERENCE. TO MY KIN, GOLD HAS NO USE AT ALL. NONE. AND YET WE HOARD IT, TREASURE IT. LOVE IT. LOOK YOU.

The beast darted to one side, and breathed fire. Beowulf flinched before he realized the blast was not aimed at him, but floated high above him like a lit torch. In that instant he saw what the dragon's body and the darkness had worked to hide: the back of the cavern was literally filled with gold. Gold cups, gold coins, ancient weapons with hilts and fittings of gold, gold armor almost certainly

useless for battle but, as a symbol of wealth and power, beyond compare. Beowulf could do nothing but stand awe-struck, for a moment, but he quickly recovered as the creature turned its attention on him again.

"Why do you show me this?"

TO OFFER IT TO YOU, BEOWULF KING. IN THE ONLY WAY A DRAGON CAN. SLAY ME, AND IT IS YOURS.

Beowulf grinned fiercely. "Leave now, in peace. Trouble not my people or my land, and you may take your gold with you. Strange as this may seem to you, I don't want it."

STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM TO YOU, NEITHER DO I.

Beowulf stepped back, stunned as much by the dragon's words as the claw swipe that made his helmet ring. "That cannot be. You are a dragon!"

AND YOU ARE A THICK FLEA.

As if to emphasize its point, the beast lashed out with one massive foot, which Beowulf ducked but not quickly enough. The force of it jarred his shield painfully against his chest and sent him sprawling. The dragon looked disgusted.

I WAITED TOO LONG. NOW ALL I CAN FIND IS AN OLD FLEA WHO CAN NO LONGER BITE. I'M SORRY, KING, BUT I CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH TO HELP YOU AND STILL BE A DRAGON. YOU WERE MY ONLY HOPE —

"Hah! Monster!"

The shout startled them both: Beowulf trying desperately to recover and raise his shield, the dragon with jaws agape prepared to finish the king. Instead now it turned its breath on Wiglaf as the young man ran into the cave shield up and sword held high, for all the fear in his eyes. Wiglaf's shield burst into flame and he flung it away from him, grabbing his sword in a two-handed grip. The dragon's next breath would have done for him, but for the fact that Beowulf scrambled to his feet, ignoring the pain, and struck again at the dragon's head. This time his sword swung true, and bit into the dragon's flesh near the neck. Bright blood gleamed on the king's sword.

"To me, Wiglaf!"

Wiglaf darted behind Beowulf, who raised his shield to cover them both. Fire from the dragon's breath turned the edges of his shield cherry red and his arm began to throb as if it were aflame itself, but the shield and the arm both held.

"I told you to stay with the others!"

"They have fled. I could not flee. I wanted to; something prevented me."

Beowulf was angry, but not at his men. "Did you call the boy too?" Beowulf demanded. "Must he die as well?"

"I am no boy!"

It was more anger than courage that prodded Wiglaf to spring forward, past the sanctuary of his king's shield and charge the dragon, who watched in amusement. It raised a paw, but again Beowulf used the distraction for advantage. He swung again, connected.

The beast's roar of pain shook the cave. It mixed with Beowulf's cry of despair as his sword, used too hard and too cruelly against the dragon's steely scales, snapped at the hilt. Beowulf threw the useless hilt at the dragon's head just as Wiglaf, all but forgotten, stabbed. Perhaps it was the fortune that guards fools, or perhaps something more, but the blade point landed behind the dragon's leg at a place more skin than scale. The beast shrieked in pain, and a glancing blow of its wing sent Wiglaf spinning back toward his king like a windmill. Beowulf reached out for him, and the dragon struck.

THE RIGHT SORT OF FLEA.

The pain was beyond any Beowulf had ever known. Fire caressed his chest and arms like a lover and he fell, twisting in agony. It was a long time before he could move again, and that at great cost.

STILL BREATHING, HERO?

"Yes ... for a bit." Beowulf got to his feet. He dropped the shield; he had no strength left to carry it. His chest and face felt as they were still enflamed. Wiglaf moaned and Beowulf moved between him and the dragon.

"Your quarrel is with me alone."

WE HAD NO QUARREL, FOOL. IT IS ENDED ... WITH SOME

HELP FROM YOUR YOUNG FRIEND, PERHAPS, BUT NO LESS FOR THAT. THANK YOU.

The dragon lay on the stone floor of the cave, its head barely raised. YOU WERE THE LAST, BEOWULF. THOSE THAT FOLLOW MAY BE WARRIORS, MAY BE KINGS, BUT NOT LIKE YOU. NEVER AGAIN.

Beowulf understood, at least a little. "A dragon tired of gold is weary indeed."

WE ARE KIN TOO, BEOWULF. A COIN HAS TWO FACES, A PROPER SWORD TWO EDGES. THOUGH THEY CAN NEVER MEET, THEY ARE JOINED. IT HAD TO BE THIS WAY, FOR ME. FOR YOU TOO, I THINK.

Beowulf drew his long dagger. The dragon did not move as he shuffled closer; it merely watched him with its great red eyes. Closer now, Beowulf could plainly see what had been hidden in the distance and poor light: the dragon's scales were dull and gray, fraying at the edges like old cloth, its claws torn and cracked. Beowulf could almost sense the age of it, like some great pit that had swallowed more years than he could imagine. The dragon was ancient, yes, and weary beyond belief.

"You are the last, too."

The thing's smile was a vast show of teeth. WE ARE THE LAST, BEOWULF. LOOK IN ANY MIRROR AND THE SHADOW YOU SEE THERE IS ME. NO LIGHT WITHOUT DARKNESS, NO SHADOW WITHOUT SUN. THERE, I SAID IT PLAINLY ENOUGH. FOR A DRAGON.

It waited, serenely patient, for the final stroke.

The scops were singing already. His senses failing, Beowulf still heard them plainly enough from his bed. He wanted to order them to be silent, but there was little point now, and no time to waste on trivial things. He sent the healers and the holy men from his bedside, indifferent to both now, and called for Wiglaf. After his servants brought the young man he sent them away, too.

"I would speak to you alone, Cousin."

Wiglaf approached the bed. He limped slightly still, and his left arm was bound to his side.

"How fare you?"

The young man shrugged. "Well enough. The healers say the arm will mend in time." His eyes were red as if he had slept poorly the last few days, and he looked at his king so solemnly that it was all Beowulf could do to keep from laughing.

"The thanes will crown you with glory and the scops will sing of you. When my name is spoken, there will yours be too. You did well," he said.

Now Wiglaf seemed close to laughter himself. "Those who heap praise on me do it out of guilt. Others would curse me for reminding them of their shame. There's no honor in any of it, but I suppose I'll have to accept it and pretend. I failed you, and they will not hear that."

Beowulf smiled through his pain. "You did not fail. As for the rest, it merely proves that you're thinking like a king. You know what moves those who follow you, as a king must. I have already spoken to the thanes concerning you, if there was any doubt. Use ... " He winced, fighting back the darkness. "Use that understanding of yours when the time comes. Forget the glory, Wiglaf. Forget the songs and reputation and praise, forget all of it except where it suits your needs. Use it where you must, but do not believe any of it. When the time comes to face the Geats' enemies, don't be a hero, Cousin — be a king. That's what your people need now, and that's what will thwart our enemies best. Understand?"

"Not entirely," Wiglaf admitted, "but I will remember."

Wiglaf, in his way, is also the right sort of flea, Beowulf thought, smiling.

Beowulf nodded once at his cousin, and let his head fall back on the pillows. It was finally enough. The darkness rose again and he did not fight it now. For heroes and kings alike there came a time when fighting was done. He vaguely heard Wiglaf calling out to him, but he did not answer. He could not. He was too far away for that, fast on the trail of dragons and monsters, far beyond the cries and whispers of the world. ■

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*The writing is on the wall, but remains there
a creature wise enough to read it?*

Blessing The Last Family

BY BATYA SWIFT YASGUR
AND BARRY N. MALZBERG
Illustration by Annie Lunsford

HELLO, THEN, MY NAME IS URIEL. I am a Good Angel. Pleased to meet you all and etc. Would that it could have been under better circumstances and so on. Blessings and curses under the shroud of the Ineffable One, may He dwell for the rest of time, can often be seen as the same. This is one of the fundamentals of faith and apostasy, as the sacred texts have made clear.

My greetings, nonetheless.

This is the essential provision as it has been written: To bless but not to help. Rule #228, the Code of the Ineffable One.

MY BAD ANGEL — HIS NAME IS ASHMODAI — is smirking of course, rubbing his wings together in wicked glee. The Davidsons were the last, after all, the final stronghold of harmony, and now they're rapidly going the way of all the others. His pleasure is so great as to be unprofessional and yet in the lexicon of the Just, who can deny him?

Here we are, then, all of the Friday Night angels together in Assembly Hall located between Heavenly Courtroom #1 and the Heavenly Hall of Most Profound Study to savor our Leviathan (yes,

Every Friday night, two heavenly angels escort a man home from Synagogue: one Good Angel, and one Bad Angel. If he returns home to harmony, the good angel says, "May it be the Divine Will that next Sabbath should replicate this one." And the Bad Angel is forced to say, "Amen." But if he finds a house bereft of harmony, then the Bad Angel says, "May it be the Divine Will that next Sabbath should replicate this one." And the Good Angel is forced to say, "Amen."

(adapted from Tractate Sabbath, 119b)

angels *do* eat, but Matriarch Sarah was a far better cook and Patriarch Abraham a more efficient waiter; goodness how my tongue rains and my stomach thunders at the aromas of Friday night kugel!) as we gather and talk, compare the odyssey of our families. Not our own families, of course; angels don't marry or

extend themselves in that way. But about our families of assignment.

Good Angel and Bad Angel #7 were assigned to the Franks. Oh, the clash and clatter of that household! Mrs. Frank, her voice sharp as the challah knife, yelling at her children; Mr. Frank, a fishmonger who gets up at 4 AM to be in the docks, sagging, flopping, and stinking like one of his flounders. Four children of different ages and decibel levels ... well, you can just imagine! G.A. and B.A. #22 have a family of four — parents, two kids. G.A. used to crow and preen whenever he talked about them. The symphony of Sabbath songs and smells, children that skipped like lambs and flew like eagles to do their parents' bidding. A white-haired, wrinkled Bubby who came on occasion to be fussed over and served. Ah, but that was long ago, so long. Since then, the Bubby died, the Mr. lost his job, the Mrs.' voice has tightened, stiffened, until it spews forth in flat monotony. The Sabbath songs now an obligatory chant instead of a joyous shout. Flames of love twisted to fires of hate, submerged under the routine of sundown, prayer, kugel, and sleep.



And so it's gone for all of them. Used to be half and half — some B.A.s winning, some G.A.s winning, some harmonious families, some dissonant — but balance, always balance, the Maimonidean Centered Path, the heavenly firmament balancing upper and lower waters. Then, one by one, droplet by droplet, the families fell away like rotting fruits from some diseased tree. The daughter married a *goy* — such shouting, so many tears. The son was failing school, Mr. LummoX accused Mrs. LummoX of being too permissive with the children, Mrs. LummoX crying and wringing her hands, saying if he were only home more. And so on and so on.

Until only one family — ours, the Davidsons — was left. Mine and my B.A.s. We're team #36, Uriel and Ashmodai, no connection with the Thirty-Six Just, this an absolute coincidence, a sport of the Ineffable, and we would trail Rabbi Davidson home from Synagogue every Sabbath, as he shook hands vigorously with congregants, wishing them a Good Shabbos, expounded Talmudic passages, gave wise and compassionate counsel. Home, then, to his Rebbitzin, who dimpled and beamed shyly under her wig, the kugel sizzling and quivering on the stove, the babies washed 'til their faces shone like the candles on the table, like the newly blessed moon in the sky.

"Just wait," B.A. used to mutter after his forced "Amen," while we'd be flying back to headquarters to report in before dinner. "There's more to that Rebbitzin than meets the eye. Somewhere underneath that wig, under those 'thank Gods,' behind those eyes, lurks a monster just waiting to be awakened. And one day it will stretch, and reach out — to a job, maybe, to some other faith, to some new horizon. It will burst forth, shatter the shell in an explosion louder than any of the others. And then, I'll get my way."

"The Ineffable One forbid," I'd say, trembling all over.

"The Ineffable One? God, you mean?" And B.A. would laugh his bitter, mocking, sardonic ripple. "God forbids nothing, except everything. God will sit back and let it happen, and there won't be a thing you can do about it. Or He. And —" he'd throw at me, just to watch me squirm. "— and the Rabbi too, and don't you forget it. Your wise, compassionate, zealous, dedicated Rabbi. Just wait 'til you find out what percolates under that *yarmulke*. That vivacious Rebbitzin ministering to her children and the ideals of Torah, wait until you see what her truest destiny has become, what she thinks of her little flock and the binding strictures of the Law. Oh, the passions of the Rabbi, the dry and quivering heat of Rebbitzinly descent, you will see what becomes of your pathetic little dreams of sanctification and hope."

But by the time we got back to headquarters, then Assembly Hall, his pronouncements and predictions would be pushed away by my determination not to acknowledge them, not to give old Ashmodai the credence he so miserably sought. The others would stare at me, all the angels good and bad with their lustrous, luminescent, credulous features brilliant against the dull slack of their robes as I would tell them of the Davidsons' Sabbath songs and words of Torah. Of course, I'd get plenty of envious grumbles from other G.A.s. Such unhappiness:

"It's not fair, I mean, a Rabbi's home is bound to be more peaceful than everyone else's —"

"You know how the prestige of the Rabbi will become a firmament against which the B.A.s will be helpless."

But their complaints or rivalrousness were shattering constructions, meant only to hide their terror, their own guilt and shame, as one by one their families had succumbed to the smug, triumphant curses of the B.A.s. Now they were all compelled to identify with my own struggles, my campaign, the transcendent condition of the Davidsons and their obedient children, the last blessed family, my mission a set of gates before their upraised, trembling heads.

But —

But the Davidsons were sliding too, in bumpy and spiral descent to the same darkness as all the rest. This epiphany can no longer be shielded: The Rebbitzin has lost her religious faith. (Old Ashmodai was right, damn him; he saw her more clearly than I did.) It seems that under her wigged and long-skirted exte-

rior, a volcano of seething and heretical lava lay waiting to erupt.

Why are women treated like — ?

Is there really a God — ?

Why is there suffering and injustice of such dimension — ?

Is the Torah really Divine if no proof other than the assurances of its inheritors can be offered — ?

Why can't we touch each other when I have my period — ?

Why do you make me unclean at this time of month, a detestable and loathsome object? What kind of God would — ?

Oh this Rebbitzin, some Rebbitzin, a cornucopia of questions, doubts, firecrackers of rage and venom: The Rebbitzin wants out. No more songs and kugels, no more Sabbath and kosher. The Rebbitzin is a spirited lady, I'll say that for her. Under the lid of the pot, under the demure cheeks and dropped eyelids, a boiling stew bubbles and splatters in the passion of fires which brew the unlikely mixture of meat and dairy, of ancient traditions and ancient doubts, as the fire mounts, mounts, and the stew overflows.

And as the Rebbitzin simmers and surges, the Rabbi clutches and embraces his holy books, as if the waters of tears and Torah could douse and drown the flames of apostasy. He cries, he pleads, his palms outstretched in prayer, in entreaty, his thumbs awl in Talmudic gesticulation. His music is a dirge, the Lamentations of Tish'a B'Av, his discussions with the Rebbitzin (who of course shares everything: her lamentations, her doubt, her stumbling efforts to reconcile to the faith, her tormenting ambivalence which sinks and sinks within her soul like the leaden raisins of her increasingly inappropriate kugels) becoming ever more florid, a storm of rejection, the Rabbi enlarged in his fury, his damnation of the uncertain and inclement Rebbitzin, the force of his rage never stronger than when he confronts in the cracked glass of her condition the riotous and piecemeal nature of his own belief.

And the babies squabble and bicker, their glow now shattered into shards of name-calling, hair-pulling screamers, their beds or cradles now pots of tears so copious as to have been gathered from the waters of the Mikvah.



h, how Ashmodai has gloated. "I am sympathetic to your condition, Uriel," he points out. "After all, your condition is mine as well, so are we bound together but nonetheless this is a massive, a massive paradox into which you have, occasionally wingless, tumbled. It cannot work out well for the Davidsons as they continue upon this disastrous and paradoxical course — how can it?" He utters his grim taunts and predictions gravely but with some real joy, kvelling in fact, spreading his wings in malediction before we fly away, a trail of cloudy substance behind us — the dark gleam of his triumphant chuckles, the pale mist of my tears — and return to the raised eyebrows of all the other Friday Night Angels: the B.A.s who greet him with cries of praise and toast his success with celestial nectar, and the G.A.s who mutter their sympathy and invite me to join a minyan of mutual support and solace.

But I can't do it. Whatever my own history and preparation, Uriel is incapable of this; I can't sit in the minyan, and request that Psalms and prayers be recited for my family. I can't spill my blood on the heavenly carpet as I recount the gradual ebbing of life force from a couple, air seeping through a pinprick — then a hole — then a gash — in a balloon, until the balloon explodes and pieces of rubber float to the floor. The theft of a diamond from its case of velvet and gold, two pairs of eyes that mirror each other's torment, reflect darkness to darkness, while their hearts mock them with the ancient promise that they who dwell in darkness shall see a great light.

I have seen the Great Light, the Rebbitzin insists, and it's not here. (She gestures around the room, the candles, the wine, the holy books, a scornful sweep of dismissal, an arc of derision and shame.) The Great Light glares brashly, she says; it leads me away,

it tells me that all this is blackness, night, and dawn lies in freedom from Jewish shackles.

No rabbis can restore their love, no Kabbalists in earth or heaven can or would even attempt to restore that pristine joy and slaughterhouse wonder which these people once had, when their marriage was young, when the Rebbitzen still believed, when their eyes were synchronous, when — however occasionally — they could touch. Now their eyes face different directions and they stagger, stumble, turn in circles, raise their arms to the heavens, fall to the heavy and unyielding stones, shattering their souls against that stone of discontent.

No minyan, however well-intentioned and devout, can replace the irreplaceable.

I thought of appealing to the Ineffable, asking Him to intervene. The last family I wanted to save; surely you would save the last family. If not the Davidsons, then who? But no, this was a God who dispatched the supreme B.A. to murder six million of His children. No intervention can be expected for a matter so trivial.

So I thought I'd ask for a transfer to a different department. Let some other angel link with Ashmodai to suffer through the degeneration and dissolution of a marriage, the atomization of a family, the cries of children, the horrors of the *get*. I'll be glad to take something easy — thank you very much — perhaps be one of those appointed over a blade of grass or a tree, ordering it to grow. (Of course, with the carnage of the trees, lots of those innocents are out of a job, and there is a long waiting list for the Agricultural Department, Grass Commander Division.)

But even if I got the job — who would help the Davidsons? There would be no hope for them at all.

No, I decided. I am their hope and, despite the mandate, despite the laws and strictures and regulations, I knew I must step in. I must intervene. Not just bless, not just say "Amen" to the curse.

I must help them.

Of course, I couldn't do a great deal. People have all these misguided ideas about angelic powers — but we're not omnipotent, only God is. (Let me tell you, if we were, you can bet I wouldn't be roaming the Eastern District on a Friday night in the company of the unseemable and gloating Ashmodai to watch a marriage, once rich and full and creamy as a wedding cake, go stale, moldy, crumble, and decay.) We have a job, each of us, and that's all we're empowered to do. Gabriel's job was to destroy Sodom, Michael's job was to inform Matriarch Sarah that she'd have a baby, and so on. Mine is to bless — and answer "Amen."

However, I knew that there was one thing, just one thing I could do. Just one. Violation of violations, treading the grounds of ultimate *verboten*. The Prime and First Law they taught us in Friday Night Angel Class: *never be seen*. Some angels, of course, must be seen — that's part of their job. The guy who talked to Balaam and the donkey, now *he* had a tricky job. First he had to be invisible to both, then just visible to the donkey (one of God's wonderful ideas, a test for Balaam, you know; God's really into testing), then visible to both. He pulled it off well, I'll say that for him, and returned to bask for eternity in the glory and radiance of that accomplishment.

But we — the Friday Night crowd — we're supposed to be cloaked, hidden, like God who remains hidden at all those times when people would most like to see Him. (More about tests and faith, I'm given to understand.) I decided that the next Friday night, I would show myself to her. Not to the Rabbi — he's already a believer, whatever Ashmodai says. But to her. I said to myself, she'll see me and come to her senses. She'll realize that the traditions are true, the Laws are just, the Torah is real. She'll embrace her heritage, and in doing so, her marriage as well. All those arguments, that back and forth about Torah and Law and repression, will cease. Harmony restored, the little faces will twinkle again. And I will again bless them, while my familiar, the doomed Ashmodai, this demon closer than my own skin and just as dear, my B.A. mutters his grudging "Amen."

That was the plan, as it evolved. I knew of course that I could get into plenty of trouble for this — get demoted to some of the grungier jobs. Get myself stuck being the Angel of Death for some hapless infant someplace. Or shipped off to hell to stoke the ovens, and that's

a full-time job, with only Sabbath off, unlike this one which is Sabbath only, with the rest of the week off. These people will never realize how I'm laying myself on the line for them. Ingratitude, of course, is part of the conditions under which we necessarily operate.

But no, it didn't work that way at all. It went in no way that I had hoped. Instead, there was just a pitiful beseeching, amid the terrible and rising laughter of B.A. — old Ashmodai to my left. He was perched on my shoulder, pecking away at my ear, telling me, "listen now, pal, you are in one catastrophic mess, and the Rebbitzen and her Rabbi are in more trouble than ever."

I did it when her husband was singing *Shalom Aleichem* — "Peace Be With You, O Angels of High." The baby was whimpering into his high chair, the older boy fidgeting with his cutlery, the Rebbitzen thinking, *how much longer? This ritual, these songs, fossils of extinct spiritual dinosaurs, relics of a past I reject* — when I alit. (Alighted?) Flapped my wings just to draw a little extra attention to myself — and executed a pretty and graceful little bow. "Hello, Rebbitzen!"

She clasped her hand to her mouth, her face white as the candle wax, eyes bulging like burned raisins atop her kugel; she gave a little shriek. "My thoughts have been heard! An angel has come, just as I was thinking — it's time to go. It's over, it's over."

Oh, the noise, the commotion, the crying children, the husband's solemn call to the doctor (Sabbath, when telephone calls are forbidden notwithstanding, this was clearly a life-and-death emergency), the cry for help — my wife's gone crazy! I've known it for some time, doctor, since she began spouting this nonsense, heresy, *apikorsus*. But how she's gone over the edge, she's hallucinating, the children are in danger —

And they came with their straps and restraints and syringes and carted her off to some looney bin. Bubby Davidson (the good Rabbi's mother) has been installed, taking care of the kids, the Rabbi is bent and tearful over his Psalms, the Rebbitzen is behind bars. Harmony?

"If not harmony," I tell Ashmodai, "a divine equilibrium. All will be in order at last, the Rebbitzen isolated, the Rabbi saved from the imprecations of his wife, the children, their little hearts no longer threatened by the unclean thoughts which paraded through the household."

"Bubby Davidson agrees with me. She whispers to the Rabbi, 'that wife of yours was the ruin and destruction of your household; thank God you're rid of her, you can get on with your life, your children will grow motherless but untainted.'"

"OK, Ashmodai," I say, "so it didn't work out exactly as I'd planned, not really, but there's tranquility just the same, peace at last, that peace which passeth all understanding. Tranquility below, tranquility above, in the higher and darker firmament, where not only the angels but the laws and *tzaddikim* and departed just surely dwell. Ah that concatenation and merging of light, arcing through, banishing the inconstant and blasphemous dark. Ah, Ashmodai, all of the curses are now blessings underneath that shroud of restoration."

But of course it did not work out that way either. Instead, this is what happened: deprived of the Rebbitzen, her sullenness and doubt cast from the household (she is not responding well to the immediate efforts of the staff, it is reported) the Rabbi was thrown upon his own devices; and just as Ashmodai had warned, just as he had implied through all of our arguments and his taunting, it seems that the good Rabbi has been in his pomegranate heart an apostate most of his own secret and unrenowned life — a secret, sinking, submerged *apikors*, who has swum hip, then chest deep in the rivers of doubt, indecision, and retribution. With the Rebbitzen the balance was maintained... he could reject her, her obvious apostasy, her evident inanity and failure to accept the True Word and in so rejecting her, in pushing her away, the Rabbi — troubled but with glinting eyes and a rakish yarmulke (in fact the best, the most plausible of all Rabbits — so say the younger females in the congregation) — the Rabbi was able to push himself away.

But this has clearly come to an end, the newly inflated and passionate Rabbi Davidson has instead had to confront the awful pos-

Continued on page 75



STORMCHILD

*What did the wind blow in on the cold
and snowy day? Love, perhaps.*

BY SUSAN WADE
Illustration by Janet Aulisio

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE WAY that day started. The dawn was thick with clouds that promised snow, and there was a wind that snatched the breath clean out of you.

The land around my place is flat, mostly, except for a bit of roll that keeps the soil from washing out when the spring thaws come, and a long bank of hills to the southwest. They make a dark line that curves alongside the river, a pinch of earth the Creator had left over when He made the Black Hills. They break the gales somewhat, but the wind still howls across the fields in the winter, and I lose some sheep to the weather every year. Storms here have a life of their own, one that doesn't pay any mind to human concerns. The blizzard that day broke across the land like a demon, early in the afternoon.

Sarah came home with the snow.

STOCK HAS TO BE CARED FOR, NO MATTER how hard the weather gets. I keep a bit of land near the house in pasture, so I can care

for the animals by myself in the winter. The best bottom-land, too; it pains me to see it wasted on pasture, but there's no help for it. I planted junipers along the fence some years back, to act as a break. The sheep do fine there, so long as they get enough fodder and can't wander off from the flock.

It was early afternoon, and the dogs and I had put in a hard day getting ready for the storm. The dogs brought the flock in pretty much by themselves. Jacob's not smart enough for that, but Sheba is. She was working the stragglers when the storm broke, with Jacob keeping the rest of the flock away from me while I cut open the feed-bales.

Right off, you could tell it was going to be a real blizzard, blown down from Canada on a cutting wind straight off a glacier. The snow stung my face like hornets, so my skin burned and my eyes watered.

I thought she was an apparition at first, when I looked up from the bale and saw her, standing there in a man's big shearling coat, with a shawl over her head. We'd had no word from her in over a year, not since right after she had gone to the Klondike gold strikes with Brady. She was standing

between me and the house, and when I looked up, she began walking toward me, slow and clumsy. That wasn't like her, to move slow, and the wind was howling like all the Hosts of Hell, swirling the snow around so I was half-blinded. It seemed a sure bet that I was seeing things. Snow can do that to a man.

It may be that we inherit fears from the dead. I never shared Ruth's superstitions about the storm children. It always seemed just a tale, told for so long in these parts that people came to believe it. But when I saw Sarah appear so suddenly, as if she had been carried there by the wind, a chill crept into my heart.

Then she stumbled, and I heard her make a little gulped whimper; even over the wind I heard it. A sound I remembered so clear from when she was a child. When she was five, one of the mules kicked her and broke her arm. Tears poured down her face, but she only made that one sound. Kind of a swallowed-crying is what it was, and not another sound did we hear from her, even when the doctor set the bone. Her mother and I were proud.

Hearing it again, I dropped the shears. "Sarah?" I said.

She held her head tucked down against the wind, and kept setting one foot in front of the other, as if she had come so far she didn't know when she could stop.

I ran to her then.

I put my arm around her and led her inside. She didn't say anything at first, but she let me sit her by the stove in her mother's rocking chair. I built the fire up and brought quilts to wrap around her, just laying them over her coat until the chill was off. The coat was

Sarah gave another stifled moan. I latched the shutter and went back to her. She was struggling up out of the chair, trying to get free of the big coat. I held her and worked it off her shoulders as gently as I could, along with the smaller wool coat she had on beneath it. When I pulled it away, she put her hands on her belly. Even under the full dress she was wearing, I could see that she was expecting, and near to term.

"Dear God, Sarah," I said, and then all the questions I'd been holding back burst out of me. "Did you come all the way from Victoria? Why were you traveling, in your condition? Where's Brady?"

She looked full at me, and I had the feeling she was actually seeing me for the first time. She said, "He's dead, Papa," just before she fainted.

I put her in the big bed and piled every quilt in the house on top, because she was cold right through. Her dress was soaked to the knees, and so were her boots. A lot of snow must have already fallen to the north. I stripped off everything except her shift, and dried her hair as best I could. It was hard to tell how long she had been in labor.

Missing my Ruth is something I feel pretty much all the time. But I don't think I ever missed her more than I did right then. She would have known what to do.

I saw that Sarah was as warm as I could make her, then put on my own coat and went out to wire the pasture shut so the flock wouldn't scatter and freeze to death. Sheba was keeping the sheep in a tight cluster at the bottom of the pasture, well away from the gate, even

It may be that we inherit fears

I never shared Ruth's superstitions about

so big on her, I knew it must be Brady's. I set the wet shawl aside to dry. It was the one her mother had made for her of our best lambswool, dyed with the juice of holly berries, and knitted soft and thick. Ruth had sent it the Christmas before, but we hadn't known if it ever reached Sarah.

As I was putting the kettle on for tea, I saw her hand, thin and white, brush over the faded surface of the quilt, tracing the wedding-ring pattern her mama had stitched there before we were married.

I left the kettle and went over to kneel beside her. "Sarah? How did you come to be walking, all the way out here in weather like this? Where's Brady?"

Her eyes went dark, an iron grey like the storm clouds outside. She shook her head, and stroked the quilt again. "I'm home," she whispered, so soft I could scarcely hear her. "Home." She seemed to relax, and her eyes drifted shut for an instant. Then she started and looked over my shoulder. "Mama?" she said.

I pulled the quilt closer around her. "Your mama is gone, Sarah," I said. "The influenza, late last winter. I wrote you, at that address in Victoria you sent last year at Christmas. You didn't get my letter?"

"Don't be angry with me, Mama. Don't you see? I have to go with Brady, he's my husband."

"Sarah," I said. "Your mama understood why you went. She was just fearful about you being out in the wilderness that way."

But it was no use. She was drifting again, and it worried me. God might know how far she had come, alone out in the cold and the wind, but I didn't. Was Brady out there somewhere, with no coat? Sarah was taken ill, that much was clear. I couldn't leave her to go look for him. I went over to the window and opened the shutter a crack. The blizzard was blowing so hard outside that I couldn't see anything except white. There would be no going anywhere, no bringing the doctor, until the storm was over.

though I hadn't been there to signal her. I got the gate closed off, and whistled the dogs in.

They're working dogs, not generally allowed in the house. Ruth had strong views on bringing animals indoors. But the weather was bitter, and I hadn't time to make a snug place for them in the barn. I took them up to the house with me, and settled them in a corner on an old blanket.

Jacob went straight to sleep, but Sheba sat there with her ears alert and looked toward the bedroom with an anxious expression. I rubbed around her ears and under her ruff, and said, "I'm worried about her too, girl."

Sarah was just as I'd left her, no warmer at all that I could tell, even having just come from out of doors myself. I built up the fire. Then I found extra linens and some of Sarah's old baby things in the cedar chest, and set water to heat.

I made her some tea that she didn't drink, then drew the rocking chair over so I could sit by her. Nothing to do but wait.

"Papa?" she said a little later. "Papa?"

"I'm right here, Sarah-girl," I said, and took her hand.

She moved her head from side to side, acting almost as if she couldn't see me. "Why won't Mama let me go with you today? I like to check the lambs, Papa. I want to come with you."

I found myself answering her the same way I always had. "Your mama believes differently about some things than I do, Sarah. She has strong feelings about the old ways. You know that she doesn't like you to be out of doors when there's bad weather coming."

"But why, Papa? I'm good with the lambs, I'm a help to you, you always say so."

Her hair was tangled. I smoothed it back from her face, and was struck by how cold she still was. "A wonderful help to me, that you

are. But your mama wants you to stay in the house today. You be a good girl and do as your mama says."

"Yes, Papa," she whispered. She rested then.

Later, when the pains got harder, she woke again. She seemed to come to herself more, and I believe she was clear in her head, this time. "It's storming," she said suddenly.

I had been sitting quiet, thinking she was asleep. "That's right."

She turned her face toward the shuttered window, as if she were listening to something I couldn't hear. "Mama always said I mustn't go out when there was a storm."

"Your mama used to say a lot of things."

Sarah shook her head, and her face grew sadder; sad and frightened at the same time. "No, it was true. She said that children who were born during a storm were brought by the wind. That's what makes me so keen on wild places. But what the wind brings, it takes away. That's why she always made me stay indoors when it stormed, so the wind wouldn't take me away."

I took both of her hands, those cold thin hands, and held them as tight as I dared. "Nothing's going to take you away, Sarah. It's Papa. I'm right here, holding your hands. You're staying right here with me."

Some of the fear left her face then, and she returned my clasp, though her hands had little strength in them. "You'll stay here with me, won't you, Papa? You'll stay, even if the wind comes for me?"

"I'll stay right with you, Sarah. I give you my word."

Her hands loosened then, and she fell into a doze.

from the dead. the storm children.

I sat with her the whole time, wiped the perspiration from her forehead after each pain, held her hand when they got bad. Later, when things got worse, I tried to tell her how sorry I was that I couldn't bring the doctor.

She arched back on the pillows, the lines of her neck drawn tight with the pain. After it passed, she turned her head and smiled at me. "That's all right, Papa. You've brought enough lambs into the world to know how it works. Babies are no different."

But it was different. She was tiring, I could tell. First births are often slow, but I feared something was wrong.

The wind outside had risen as daylight faded, and in spite of the fire I'd kept burning high, a chill seeped into the house that left me feeling cold around the edges. I lit the lanterns, then brought some washed fleeces up from the cellar and tucked them between the quilts for more warmth. But when I touched her face, Sarah's skin was icy against my hand.

"I can't keep you warm enough," I said.

Her eyes grew troubled, and she said, "It's all right, Brady. You keep the coat. I'm not cold at all."

Then she went to sleep until the next pain came.

It was the hardest night of my life. The hardest she ever endured too. And her last. The baby came just before dawn, in a rush of blood there was no stanching.

"A boy," I told her, when she asked, trying to hold my voice steady. I wrapped him in an old child's quilt and held him so she could see. "What will you call him? Brady, after his papa?"

She reached out and stroked his face, which was pursed in a sober little knot. He had quit crying as soon as I wrapped him up. "Samuel," she whispered. "Call him Samuel. 'Lamb of God.'" She looked up at me and smiled. "He is, you see. God's Lamb." Then her eyes dropped closed, and her breathing went shallow.

I sat with her as the storm blew fierce, listening to the wind that had come to take her. She died as the sun rose. When I held her hand to my face, her skin felt no colder than it had before. My poor little girl.

Samuel began to cry. From hunger, I expect. He was too small to understand that his mother was gone. I tucked him next to her among the pillows and went to make him a sugar teat with some goat's milk.

As I was warming the milk, Sheba jumped up from her place near the door and dashed to the bedroom. I heard her barking wildly, and followed her. "Sheba! Hush, now. You're not allowed in there."

When I reached the bedroom, the shutters were banging against the wall. The bed was empty, except for Samuel, tucked up in the shawl Sarah had worn over her head. He had stopped crying and was sucking his fist. Sheba stood beside the bed, watching the window, every muscle in her body tensed as she guarded the baby.

A flurry of snow swirled in through the open window. Sheba growled, a low dangerous sound that made the skin on my arms prickle. The swirling snow turned slower, then stopped.

I ran and looked out the window, called to Sarah. Saw nothing, only early morning darkness, and the snow, blown by the raging wind. It had come, come and taken her, just as she had known it would. And I hadn't stayed by her, even though I gave her my word.

ABOUT TWO WEEKS AFTER THE BLIZZARD LIFTED, JOSHUA CANTRELL rode out to my place to tell me about the deaths. The sheriff had received a telegraph message from people up in Wichita Trace, near the Canadian border, saying that Sarah and Brady had been caught by the storm when their wagon lost a wheel. They had frozen to death before they could get to shelter.

Josh told me quiet-like, looking at his boots the whole time. He said that Brady had died first, having wrapped Sarah in his coat to try to save her. He meant it as a comfort, I suppose. All I could think of was my girl, out there in the snow and the wind, frightened and alone. But I listened until Joshua finished, then turned and went up the low hillside beyond the barn, to where Ruth is buried.

Josh followed me up the hill, removed his hat and stood beside me for a moment.

"I knew something had happened to her," I said.

He nodded. "I'll be getting along now. The sheriff said to tell you the bodies would be sent by mule train in a few days. One of his boys'll bring you word when they arrive."

"I'm obliged to you, Josh," I said then. "For bringing me the news yourself."

He squinted up at the sun, then blinked a couple of times before replacing his hat. "She was a fine girl, your Sarah. A fine girl."

WHEN THE BODIES ARRIVED, FOLKS REMARKED HOW SARAH WAS STILL wrapped in Brady's big shearing coat, talking about the power of love and such things. Nobody seemed to notice that she had neither hat nor scarf on her head.

I didn't mention to anyone about the boy, but word gets around. When folks started asking about him, I let it out that Brady's sister was caring for him when his folks were killed, and had brought him up to me after. He's good-sized, like his papa was, and nobody's ever questioned his age.

It's better this way. People hereabouts are God-fearing. I know there's no harm in Samuel. If his mother sent her spirit home to bear him, while she lay freezing to death on some lonely road, it was only by God's grace that she did so. But others might not understand.

We get along fine, young Samuel and I, and he seems content with the life here. Sheba is too old now to work sheep, but she has no trouble minding Samuel for me. It's as if she knows he wants looking after. And he's partial to her, of course. He's good with all the animals, and loves being out of doors, just as his mama always did. Puts me in mind of her a good deal.

I always keep him in when a storm is brewing, though he doesn't understand why. But the way I see it, there's no sense in tempting fate. No sense at all. ■

va May Hart came home to find buzzards standing on the corpse of her husband down in the front part of her pasture. That damned old man had never had the gumption to buy himself a riding mower much less a brush hog, and so every day he got that silly damned red 3.75 horsepower Murray Model 83 push mower he'd purchased at Walmart for 99 dollars and he took it out into the forty acres of weed, kudzu, and poison ivy to mow a single gas tank of what he called his "gal-darned yard." The exercise was good for him, he said, 'cause he never did get any other way, unless rolling out of bed or hookin' up the trailer hitch for the fishin' boat can be counted. Of course, in Redgunk, Mississippi, you gotta sometimes bend your standards.

However you count it, he needed the exercise, seeing how he was approximately 63.5 percent over ideal body weight, which meant he was a fat son of a bitch, most of it in his stomach, and the mowing would indeed have done him some good if he hadn't chain-smoked and drank the better part of a fifth of Jack Daniels while he did it. He kept the Jack hidden in a little leather satchel he tied to the handlebars, and his six-year-old was always watching to see if he could catch a glimpse of him swallowing the stuff, so he had to do it on the sly, like when he stopped to wipe the sweat from his big brow, which was about every other row.

And he might have survived mowing that forty acres over extended periods of time if he hadn't got madder and madder and more and more heated with each row as he looked back across the forty to see what he'd done the day before and the day before that and to see, in fact, that it was all going to weed again right behind him, the little tendrils of the greenbriar just wavin' and laughin' at him in their little green stalky hearts. And he likened what he felt to the emotions those noble Painters-of-the-Golden-Gate-Bridge must feel, looking back across the swaying monument when they finally have painted all the way across, only to know they must walk back over and start at the beginning again. So Moe Hart was like an angry Sisyphus rolling his rock with pissed little jerky movements of his fat wrists around this big field, rolling and rolling and finally after days and days rolling right down to the barbed wire fence line — where he stopped, looked back, took a slug of Jack, and rolled it back up again, to start

over the next day. But to give him credit he kept on with it; he had commitment; and though there might not be any ultimate meaning to the activity, he was going to make some meaning out of it, goddamn it, even if it killed him. Which, of course, it did.

It was his only job, you see, and had been since 1962 when he was fired from his live-hanging position down at the chicken processing plant in Blue Falls — too slow with those fumbly fingers of his, and hardly anyone ever got fired off the live hangin' position. So there wasn't much marketability in that rotund body of his and it was easy for him to become obsessed with that one job he could do. He worked damned hard at what he knew best — mowing his lawn and drinking the Jack — and now that he was well-trained he didn't want any career change, so he kept on going and going and even when he dutifully told his teenage boy Chris that it was about time he started to help with the lawn, too, he wouldn't ever let him do it; and the one time he did turn over the handlebars to his son, he kept saying things like, "Now you're missing a row, boy, you're missin' a row" or "Slow down, damn it, that bramble'll pop right back up and it'll look like you didn't even mow the damned thing; you gotta give the blade time to circulate, circumambulate" — he was a strong advocate of a slow walking mow. But the slow method didn't do him any good, either, with all that Jack and nicotine and anger in him, and he was gettin' on in years — was about 58 — and he was fat as sin, with a high diastolic blood pressure reading of about 95 and a touch of the COPD, and he deserved to die, which of course, he did.

There were once five great trees in Ireland,
The yew of Ross and the oak of Mugna,

*Return with us now to the
otherworldly, yet commonplace
town of Redgunk, Mississippi.
The mummy's brain is gone now,
but magic still grows there.*

BY WILLIAM R. EAKIN
Illustration by David Martin

the ash of Dathi and Uisnech and Tortu,
And when the Christians came they were
cut down.
The Druid-shaman singers, who guarded
the trees
with their very lives
and spoke the trees' ancient wisdom
and preserved their truth
These Druid-shaman singers, who had
guarded the trees
all those spirit centuries,
finally cut their own trees down.
And there are grasses left that speak their
memory
in the wyrd poems of Ogham,
singing the songs of the Shaman in silent
letters,

LAWN MOWER

MOE



D/MARTIN

They sing the letter *Silad clann*
and the letter *Li sula*.

AND WHEN THE BOYS GOT HOME the ambulance was already out there, and Chris the sixteen-year-old got hysterical and said, over and over again, "Damn, he told me I should mow the lawn now that I'm a teenager, he told me I should mow it, he told me I should mow it, but instead I've spent all my damned time and money" — and his adolescent hormones — "in the Felpham mall ogling the teenyboppers." The death greatly impacted him, and when he was older he would write the award-winning essay titled "The Puritan Work Ethic, Guilt, Sex and the Mall Phenomenon: Confessions of a Mall-rat," which you will find in the next issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and which may indeed make as big a dent in the consciousness of the 21st century as St. Augustine's *Confessions* did in the Middle Ages, because it is a call to young people to move away from their implicit "guilt of superficiality" into what the author calls the "chained freedom of the truly responsible attitude," "the mature attitude of duty, which Sisyphus must have felt for the rock." In other words, the essay is a bunch of serious hooey, but what else but serious hooey gives shape and structure to the worlds of human culture, truth being so much really dangled good fiction?

And Iva May said over and over again, "I told that man to take an aspirin a day. An aspirin a day. That's all it takes a clear out a man's arteries is an aspirin a day. But no, did he ever listen to me, did he ever once listen to me? An aspirin a day and lay off that damned Jack." And she'd always been pissed at him anyway because, when she married him sometime when Ronald Reagan was president and she was a mere spry fourteen, she came very quickly to resent being slept upon by some liquor-soaked tub of a man and she told him he oughtta go back to the live-hanging job at the chicken processing plant, and maybe it had been long enough they'd lost the records of how poor a job he'd done, or maybe he could give them a fake name and a falsified Social Security number so he'd get his job back and simultaneously not have to pay taxes—and Iva May, being one who often pontificated on matters grand and apocalyptic, on matters such as the healing powers of Vitamin C and aspirin, believed the IRS and the U.S. government and the Illuminati who controlled all international affairs were together equivalent to the Anti-Christ — "And I'll prove it," she'd say. "You count the letters in his name: Ronald Wilson Reagan" — and Lord, we don't want to send our hard-earned money to those Satanic bastards anyway, seeing how we barely afford to live much less give charitably to the great-Moloch-Taxman who is in the process of world domination — "and if you would just go get a job," she would tell him, maybe she wouldn't have to work all the damned time — even when she was dropping babies — at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Five and Dime.

And Jeremy the six-year-old said, "But he did take his aspirin, Mom. He just swallowed it down with the Jack." And she took a slug of it herself.

The buzzards circled that part of the field for the better part of the day, looking for little bits and splashes of flesh and blood they'd

ripped off the man's face, remnants of the man who would become known all across Blake County from Felpham to Blue Falls as Lawn-mower Moe.

There were once five great trees in Ireland, The yew of Ross and the oak of Mugna, the ash of Dathi and Uisnech and Tortu, And when the Christians came they were cut down. The Druid-shaman singers, who guarded the trees with their very lives and spoke the trees' ancient wisdom and preserved their truth

These Druid-shaman singers, who had guarded the trees all those spirit centuries, finally cut their own trees down.

And there are grasses left that speak their memory in the wyrd poems of Ogham, singing the songs of the Shaman in silent letters, They sing the letter *Silad clann* and the letter *Li sula*.

**Buzzards
circled
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ripped off the
man's face...**

IT WAS NOT EVEN MIDNIGHT OF THAT first day — Chris had retired to his room with a copy of the *Victoria's Secret* catalog, and Iva May had fallen asleep surfing the five hundred channels of the satellite television and wondering what she would miss with Moe gone, what she would miss in her life, if anything — when Jeremy came into the room and shook his mother awake.

"Mama, he's doin' it again!"

"What? Who?"

"You told me to tell you if he was ever drinkin' out there, and sure enough, he's out there drinkin' the Jack."

She shook herself and realized what he must be talking about. "Oh, baby," she gave his little head a squeeze. "You poor baby; you're dreaming about your Daddy, ain't you?"

"Hell no, I ain't dreamin', come and look." And they went to the back porch to look out into the dark pasture.

Far in the distance, roughly where his body had been discovered and where now little black beetles were polishing up the last bit of flesh the buzzards had gnawed off, was the lawnmower.

She listened. It was quiet. Quiet and still. "I saw him out there, drinking from that satchel of his."

She squinted and looked. "I thought I dragged that mower back to the shed."

"He was running it!"

"Oh, my baby, that's a dream."

"No —"

"Do you hear that mower runnin'?"

"No, ma'am."

"Do you see him now?"

"No, ma'am."

"Mind can play a lotta tricks on a fellow, 'specially in the country outside'a Redgunk, Mississippi. You remember when those boys thought they saw a mummy-man down at the Redgunk cemetery?" He nodded.

"Purely imagination and a good explanation for pies stolen from Mabel Delashmit's window sill, that's all; that and maybe a little breezy darkness in the kudzu and greenbriar. Let's go to bed."

She led him to his room, and stopped to poke her head in at Chris,

who stuffed the Victoria's Secret under his mattress, open to the page of floral-print panty-and-bra sets.

"Didn't hear a mower, did ya?" asked Iva May of her quite-innocent looking adolescent.

"No, ma'am," he said in that polite Young Republican voice of his. By the way, now that Ronald Wilson Reagan was no longer in power and the USSR had crumbled and the New World Order was something you could ignore if you watched Six Million Dollar Man reruns on the Sci-Fi Channel instead of CNN, she let him go to the Young Republicans meetings, which were held in the gym at the Consolidated Schools of Blake County, seeing how either (a) they could do little real harm to society, (b) they could do little more harm than television and church youth groups would do or (c) it was too damned late anyway to stop it. He liked going because it was a good way to meet repressed young girls like Sarah Kilgariff, whom he ritualistically drove in his battered yellow pickup to the cliffs above Gish Quarry for some ritualistic fumbling — no political sentiments in that boy's body, or in that of most young political animals in whom sex, as we know, is the prime mover behind all commitment.

"No, ma'am, ain't heard a mower," he said.

"Go to sleep then. And stop whackin' your Jean Jeudi!"

"Yes, ma'am." But that night as he tried to go to sleep, thinking of that big white elephant bra of Sarah Kilgariff's and wondering what trick of wiring made it impossible to remove, he suddenly thought of a distant mowing sound, and of his Dad, of his Dad, and he sat up and he got a little spooked. He sat and listened and heard nothing, nothing but the breeze in the grasses of the field that were already starting to turn to unmanageability. Nothing but the grasses themselves.

GRANDMA CAITLIN LIVED IN THE WINDY PINES RESIDENCE CENTER, which is the hoppinest place to be in downtown Redgunk on any given night, especially on Wednesdays when the RiverBottom Boys sing their Barbershop quartets, and it is there that she is deteriorating away right this minute, as she has been for some thirty years since her first stroke. And Chris went to see her once before his dad's death on his way to the Felpham Mall. Sometimes she can speak intelligibly and recognizes who you are, and she did that day, and she told him in a breath that smelled of pureed liver: "My mama's maiden name was MacCuill, and before I married Mr. Hart after he came back from the trenches of France in the Big War, I was living with my mama and daddy, and my mama told me, 'Cat' — she used to call me Cat — 'You are a descendant of some very peculiar people, whom I want you to remember. I want you to get the hell away from Mr. Hart because he will dilute —'" And both Grandma Caitlin and her own mama said dilute with a long 'i' — "He will dilute that ancient blood in ya, and it's hard enough to keep from fighting against it and its power, you see. But you are a descendant of the Druids, and I mean it, girl —" The "Druids," by which Grandma Caitlin understood the white-robed hippies who gather every solstice or so at Stonehenge, a report of which she'd seen on a program called "Ancient Mysteries" on the cable television hooked up in the rec room of the Windy Pines Residence Center. And Grandma Caitlin said, "My mama, she said, 'Girl, if I were you and young and spry and I had any gumption at all, I would get on a boat and go back to that country from which my grandfather came, and I would live the air breathed by my ancestors. And you marry that Mr. Hart and move to Redgunk, Mississippi —" which, of course, was where Mr. Hart intended to go, aspiring to be a farmer — "Why you'll end up forever in some tar paper shack with twenty bare-footed and stupid kids." Well, weren't a tar paper shack forever and not twenty kids, either; bought the first mobile home in '68 and then the one your Daddy's in now about ten years later. See what I'm trying to tell ya?"

He'd lost his concentration and was feeling the call of the mall in his gonads. He'd come at all only because his mama gave him enough money to buy a Clint Black CD if he'd do it.

Grandma Caitlin said, "Druids: You understand what a man is if he got Druid in his blood? You hearda Merlin, boy? Or Morgana le Fay? When a man's got that kinda power in his blood, he becomes a madman, a godman. And with that kinda power, he can rule the

world, he can raise up kings and queens, he can shake the very foundations of the rocky earth—" And she looked at him with a weird gleam in her eyes as if she'd just spoken things she could never have learned in this life, half-conscious things that were not in her possession. "Or he turns mad and ends up in some insane asylum suckin' his toes because he can't handle it. He can't handle the wild crystalline-knowledge of the lichen-covered stone and the silent inner heartwood knowledge of trees, or the hunting-blood-wisdom of the animals. See, boy?"

And he looked at her like she was crazy, her words just so much meaningless mumbling.

She leaned over at him and waved him closer, as if she was about to reveal some secrets: "Or, boy, he runs like a rabbit into the thicket for safety and does his best to kill that wondrous beast in him, to bury it; 'cause that kinda power's enough to rip a man and his world apart, see? I'm not talkin' the cartoon-imaginin's of poets, here: I'm talkin' about a man gainin' the wisdom and the power of the earth itself. It is so wondrous that it rips open a man's soul, and too many of us ain't ready for that. And never will be."

He sat back, and tried to look away. And then the gleam in her eye was gone and she spoke again like a normal woman: "And my mama spoke some words that she said I must remember. And strange, ain't it, that you forget all the important things when you're living your life and don't remember 'em until you finally sit down and the crap starts clearin' away when the brain cells die and you have some quiet time there in front of the TV down in the rec room and your best conversation partners are Ernest Stambaugh, who ain't no better than an eggplant, and Opal Childers, who thinks she's ten. Well let me tell them to you boy, before I forget 'em." And she nearly sang, with a strange Celtic voice he'd never had her use:

There were once five great trees in Ireland,
The yew of Ross and the oak of Mugna,
The ash of Dathi and Uisnech and Tortu,
And when the Christians came they were cut down.
The Druid-shaman singers, who guarded the trees
with their very lives
and spoke the trees' ancient wisdom
and preserved their truth
These Druid-shaman singers, who had guarded the trees
all those spirit centuries,
finally cut their own trees down.
And there are grasses left that speak their memory
in the wyrd poems of Ogham,
singing the songs of the Shaman in silent letters,
They sing the letter *Sílad clann*
and the letter *Li súla*.

HE NODDED HIS HEAD AND IMMEDIATELY, ALMOST INTENTIONALLY, forgot what she sang, just as his daddy had done psychological centuries before. Then the old lady went off into her own distraction and started singing "My walkin' shoes don't fit me anymore ..." and Chris went off to Felpham to see if he could collect more guilt and a squeeze of some sort satisfying enough so he could forget the urine smells of the Residence Center and the ancient Gaelic singing of someone good as dead.

"PRAISE THE LORD, I SAW THE LIGHT."

"Oh, please." Chris felt like throwin' up. His Dad hadn't ever seen no light and never would. Better to play, "Honkey-tonkin'." But the recorded bluegrass music kept playing through the Rococo parlor of the Redgunk Funeral Home and Mr. Derek Brin, the overstaffed funeral director, brought the little jar that now held his dad and set it in Iva May's lap.

Iva May had told Mr. Brin, "I can't afford no box," and so now Mr. Brin, right there in the middle of their little memorial service, winked at her and said, "It'll be a lot cheaper this way."

He hovered above her for a moment and then added, "Miz Hart, I do have another service comin' up —"

"Oh, oh, yes," she said and the three of them stood and went back to the forty acres. And Chris asked, "What we gonna do with them ashes?"

"Tudn't I put 'im up on top of the TV," said Iva May.

"Dudn't seem very dignified does it?" replied Chris with detachment. "Couldn't we...do something with 'em?"

Six-year-old Jeremy spoke up then: "I think we oughta spread 'em out in the field. That's where he spent all his fuckin' time."

And sure enough that was the best idea Iva May had entertained all day: "I didn't have to dust the damned urn and could use it for her daffodil arrangements.

FOLKS DOWN AT THE SQUARE SAY THE REAL APPARITIONS BEGAN THE evening after Iva May and her boys sprinkled Lawnmower Moe on the southern part of the forty acres. And one old fellow said, "It makes sense that Lawnmower Moe'd come back, since it's not right to cremate a man —"

"So why the hell ain't it right to cremate a man?"

"Bible says the body's gonna resurrect on the Judgment Day, and that means your body's gotta be intact as possible. What the hell kinda creature am I gonna be if I drift up outta the earth just a bunch of black soot?"

"Well, sir, your thinkin' don't make no sense to me," said another. "By the time we get to the Judgment Day, I 'spect I'll be nothin' but a bunch of worm-eaten bones, anyway, if that, a bunch of calcified deposits someone calls paleolithic. If God can raise us up he can sure as hell put us back together again. Besides, if we don't cremate somebody, what the hell we gonna do when we run outta room to put people in?"

"Just ain't right." Well, this is the typical sort of theological discussion apparitions and UFO abductions and mummy sightings always raise in Redgunk, Mississippi.

"Besides," says the anti-cremation speaker, "Proof of it is that Lawnmower Moe's ghost is workin' around in the damned fields, lookin' for his body and playin' with that lawnmower of his."

"Bull shit. Ain't no ghost anyway." And when it comes down to simple affirmations of faith like "Just ain't so" or "Ain't none anyway," it's usually come down to the end of the conversation.

WELL, HERE'S THE TRUTH, AS BEST I KNOW IT, GIVEN WHAT TRUTH IS. That first night Chris woke with a start. He heard it: someone had started the mower. He sat up and listened and realized it was unmistakable. What the hell would someone be doing starting the mower at two in the damned morning? Moonlight came through the polyester curtains.

Somebody's out there, thought Chris in his teenager's head. *Someone's playing a trick on me, they've gone and started Dad's mower, even after Mama put it in the damned shed and locked the padlock.*

Chris got up. Moon's full tonight, don't it figure; strange feelings come over a man when the lunatic moon is full, and so of course they'd play this trick on me tonight so my imagination would start goin' crazy.

There was the sound of the mower running over a rock; the motor stopped. Chris listened carefully, and the mower started up again. "Damn." So now he stood up in nothing but his briefs and went out into the darkness of the living room and tried to peer out into the night through the window. Something was moving out there in the southern part of the field, right about where Daddy'd died and the mowin' had stopped.

Well, hell, if you wanna play a trick like that, they can just save me some work — And then he caught himself thinking this, and felt that already mentioned guilt come in to his gut and he thought that I oughta be doin' it; I shoulda been doin' it all along, 'stead of making the old man go back and forth like that all day long every day. Son kills Dad; future generations will think that and — shit, who cares what people think, I shoulda been doin' it all along anyway and now—. Now he realized he needed to go out there into the middle of the field to see who was fooling around.

Grumbling about it he put on his Reeboks, and in underwear and tennis shoes, walked toward the sound of the mower hitting thick

brambles and sticks. "Hey, you!" Chris called out when he could finally make out the shape of a man behind the mower.

The man-shape did not pay attention to him and just kept on mowing. The moonlight shimmered on his outline.

"Hey, you, what the hell you think you're doing?" Chris demanded. And then the man stopped and looked right at him, and Chris could see the moon dancing on the man's eyes. "Dad? What the hell you doin'?"

The man did not reply and Chris felt a breeze come off the grass, and he shivered. "Dad — you're not supposed to be doin' this, you know. You're supposed to be — restin'."

And the man spoke, in a weedy, whispery voice, like the voice of a man who'd been buried or sprinkled into soil and was already turning into plant life. "If this grass ain't cut everyday, boy, it'll take over — the kudzu and the greenbriar and the little trees, they become monsters before you know it. Take over the yard and eat up the damned mobile home, you boys and your mama with it."

Chris's heart had stopped. And he tried to speak, but found he didn't have the breath in his lungs.

Lawnmower Moe turned and started to move forward again, the lawnmower chugging at his feet. But Chris motioned for him to stop: "No, no, Dad. Don't do it. Don't do it. Go back into your earth, that's where you belong, you see, you can't just mow the damned lawn for all eternity, you gotta go back, you're dead, Dad."

"Nobody ain't dead, til they get their lawn completely —"

"But —" *Good Jesus, the lawn ain't even mowed completely. Shit.* "Let me do it, let me do it, old man!" And just as Chris stepped forward, the apparition was gone and the mower churned to a halt, being out of gas.

"Damn!" said Chris aloud. "Damn. Damn."

WELL, THAT BOY GOT UP AT THE BREAK OF DAWN WHEN ALL THE birds were doing their best to sing the sun awake, and he walked out into the field, all dressed in his Dad's workin' overalls, and he put some gas into the mower. One gas tank's worth, that's what the Old Man did, every day. One gas tank's worth.

Iva May had gotten up when she heard the home's rickety door slam and she looked out through the screen window and called out, "What the hell you doin' out there?"

"I'm the man of the house now Mama. Someone's gotta mow the damned lawn."

"Well —" She was hesitant and did not understand, as Chris did not understand. And she said simply, "I'll give you a holler when breakfast is made."

Chris primed the mower, set the speed control and pulled the string. Nothing happened. "Damn." He pulled the string again. The little motor didn't even want to turn over.

He yanked the string hard this time. And again. And again and again until he broke out into a major sweat. *Damned engine's gummed up.* So he went and got a tube of Gum-Out and some gas treatment and poured that in. And he pulled the string and pulled the string and pulled the string with a mounting hysteria and then he thought. *Maybe spark plug.*

The sun rose in the sky and he changed the oil and rebuilt the engine and then knew the truth. *That bastard. Why would some old fart of a ghost want to keep me from mowing the damned lawn?*

Look at all this I gotta mow, the damned briars are growin' too high to take out with this damned pushmower, they're — that thick kudzu and those little trees, those little trees, they'll be too big for — that's why Daddy kept goin' and goin' and goin', all that stuff gets big, a moment where you ain't vigilant and it takes over, it takes over —

And then he heard the whispering, the whooshing sound of the breeze through those laughin' damned little greenbriar plants and through the grasses: whoosh, swish, silad, silad clann. And for some reason he got nervous, really nervous, and he forgot all about Iva May promising him some breakfast, and he went into town to see Grandma Caitlin.

And he said to her, "Grandma Caitlin, there seem to be a lot

of things happening these past few days that I don't rightly understand — and, I don't know that you would know, either, but I feel like if we could talk about it, maybe it would clear up."

Or go away.

She replied, "Jeopardy."

"Pardon?" he said with a shiver.

"Jeopardy. I watch it everyday. You should, too, you know, it's educational, and that Alex Trebec, he is so damned cute." Even though he hadn't hosted the show for nearly a decade.

"Jeopardy?"

"Now who the hell did you say you were again?"

THERE WERE ONCE FIVE GREAT TREES in Ireland,
The yew of Ross and the oak of Mugna,
the ash of Dathi and Uisnech and Tortu,
And when the Christians came they were
cut down.

The Druid-shaman singers who guarded
the trees
with their very lives
and spoke the trees' ancient wisdom
and preserved their truth
The Druid-shaman singers who had
guarded the trees
all those spirit centuries
finally cut their own trees down.

And there are grasses left that speak their
memory
in the wyrd poems of Ogham,
singing the songs of the Shaman in silent
letters,

They sing the letter *Silad clann*
and the letter *Li sula*.

THE MOON HAD ALREADY STARTED TO
SHRINK. CHRIS LOOKED OUT and saw
him there with the mower again and he
went to get Iva May. Iva May looked
out and didn't even see the mower.
She said, "Chris, I believe you musta been
dreaming."

"No, ma'am," he said feeling for
some reason quite desperate. "He is so
obsessed with that field that he is out
there, right now, right now. He is so
obsessed he's come back from the dead."

"He ain't 'out there boy. Who's
obsessed?"

Who's obsessed?

"I'm goin' back to bed," said Iva May,
and she did.

And the boy looked, looked and looked,
and watched as Lawnmower Moe started
that galdarned mower again and mowed a whole damned
tank's worth.

And the next day Chris went to the mall and bought a new 3.75
horsepower Murray Model 83 push mower, and he started it in the
store parking lot just to be on the safe side, and when he got it back
to that forty acres, of course, it didn't give even the intimation of
starting again. *That son-a-bitch has me by the yin-yang.* And that night,
all he could do was watch as Lawnmower Moe kept going with
another tankful — even though Chris had drained the gas. That
night, and the next, and the next, Lawnmower Moe kept going with
the silent passive violence of a pure obsession, and Chris felt a kind
of anger and a madness rising up inside him like the twig of a green-
briar, and he yelled through the screen window, "Why the hell you
don't this, you old fuck!"

And there was no reply. Night after night the anger grew, and
Chris was the only one who could see Lawnmower Moe, though

sometimes Jeremy did when half-asleep, half in dream; but surely
they could see that the forty was being mowed row by row, gas tank
by gas tank. Iva May and half of Redgunk — the unbelieving scoffers
who must find psychological explanations for the miraculous —
believed that it was really Chris, getting up in the middle of the
night, forsaking Victoria's Secret, and walking back and forth along
the rows there in his briefs and Reeboks.

And God I would do that! Chris told himself, nearly bleeding with
the desperation, *if that fat old ghost would let me do it!* And finally one
night he got fed up. There was no moon at all but the old man still
shimmered out there with eerie moonglow. Chris slammed his way
out of the mobile home and strode right up to Lawnmower Moe and

said, "Damn you, why the hell won't you let me do it?"

Lawnmower Moe cut the engine, leaned against
the handle bars and took a long swig from an empty
Jack Daniel's bottle. He just shrugged, and his pot
belly shook.

"No, you must tell me."

The ghost shrugged again and now the fury pos-
sessed Chris, and he lunged at his Dad
and grabbed him by his what turned out
to be thick, fleshy throat and threatened
with a fist to pummel his face.

"Stop it, Son," said the substantial
fleshy ghost of Moe Hart. "I don't
believe I can let you do it, no matter
what you try to do to me —"

"Why the hell not?"

Moe's face trembled just a little as
he seemed to think about the answer,
then he said, "It's 'cause you don't
understand the importance of it"

"What could be so damned important
about mowing a field?"

"See there, just proves my point. You
don't see the importance and so you
would be careless, you'd miss a row here
and there, and you'd fail to go slow over
the really tall stuff."

"I would not! I would do a damned good job."

"Can't let you do it!" And the apparition turned to
lean over to the string and pulled the mower into
action again.

"No!" screamed Chris. "I won't let you do it!

You are dead! You must let me do it now!"

And he grabbed his Dad by the shoulders
and yanked him away, and they were suddenly
wrestling and kicking at each other, and
blood started streaming from Chris's nose,
but he would not let the old man do it. He
would not let him do it! And with a surge
of a strange energy, which he had no idea
he could have: something that came to him
from beyond him, he smacked the old fel-
low really hard in the face, and Lawn-
mower Moe fell from his post, and Chris took the handle.

The mower started again and kept running, and there in the rays
of blackness from the moon that did not shine, he walked up and
down with fury, with wildness, with a horrible light in his eyes, and
he mowed an entire tank's worth.

He did not tell his mother, but that next night he went again. And
the next. And the Old Man took a seat and watched him, nervously,
as if a great deal was at stake, and to prove that he understood this,
Chris mowed more and more furiously, with kind of righteous anger
and chilling fear that kept him moving, moving, moving and this
evening kept him mowing until the dawn.

When Iva May woke up she was surprised to see Chris still in his
room, sleeping — he usually the early bird. She examined his shoes

Continued on page 80

Lawnmower
Moe's ghost is
wonkin' around in the
damned fields,
lookin' for his
body and playin'
with that
lawnmower
of his."

THE FANTASY ART OF BOB EGGLETON



BOB EGGLETON AND I grew up together. Not literally — since we met when we were in our twenties — but as artists. Bob's first cover art for a magazine illustrated my first cover story — "Sing," in *Aboriginal SF*. We won our first Hugos on the same night, Bob's for Best Artist, and mine for Best Editor. Ironically, we were both absent. Bob, ever gregarious, flew in to pick his up. I had mine shipped.

I'm involved with Bob the Artist in a number of capacities: as a writer; as an editor; and as a

collector. As a writer, I've had several stories illustrated by him. (But no book covers. We're working on that.) As an editor, I've chosen stories for Bob to illustrate. And as a collector, I own two original Eggletons and sev-

eral prints, and hope to buy more. I think Bob is one of the best artists working today.

But it is a particular pleasure to write about Bob the Fantasy Artist. When I became editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in early 1991, Bob and I had a phone conversation

BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I painted Here's Lookin' at 'Ya (this page) for the best-selling British horror anthology. "Just paint a dead clown," said editor Stephen Jones. LEFT: "Weregirl" was done for Mark Simmon's book, One Foot in the Grave. The image went from being a book cover to an exploration of textures... and fetishes. This piece says more about the artist than he wants people to know!





ABOVE: "Dank Den," depicts a short story by Marc Laidlaw. I loved doing the 'goopy iche' the most. It was nominated for a Hugo Award in 1996. RIGHT: "Jessie, Airborn," painted for Fantasy and Science Fiction, was really a personal piece concerning magic vs. religion, and letting dreams free you from people with wings of stone and no imagination. The woman, a personal friend, can be seen eclipsing a statue of an angel in a cemetery.

about futures, his and mine. Somewhere in the middle, he lamented his reputation.

At that time, Bob was known as the astronomy guy. So few artists working in the SF/fantasy field can accurately illustrate space, spaceships, and planets. Bob's paintings were always beautiful, realistic, and right on point. But he wanted to branch out. He wanted to illustrate fantasy.

"Give me a fantasy cover, Kris," he said, and since I wasn't in charge of assigning artists — my publisher was and is — it took a few covers before we were able to showcase Bob's fantasy work. Our most popular Eggleton cover in recent years was "Dankden," reproduced above, illustrating a Marc Laidlaw fantasy novella of the same name.

At the time he made the request of me, he made it of art directors and editors all over the field. A sea change happened in Eggle-

ton's public work. He still did his astronomy covers but, in addition, he did fantasy covers: intricate dragon and bird-like creatures that never existed in nature, but could have; realistic backdrops illustrating fantastic creatures; and skies, skies, skies—some blue, some green, some a red that doesn't occur on the Earth we know.

Once it became clear that Bob had range, he got other assignments. In addition to fantasy, he branched into horror, creating visions that weren't graphic but were terrifying just the same. And through it all, the Eggleton sensibility stood out.

For example, Bob always uses realistic detail. Bob's work is not based in Impressionism or Cubism. It's based in the solid workings of the universe. Look at his creatures. They don't exist, yet he has imagined them so fully he knows what the folds beneath their eyes look like. Or examine the floating woman





ABOVE: This painting was done for the book *Magic Song of Time*, part of the "Magic: The Gathering" paperback book series. It's an instance where the author told me exactly what she wanted. I was happy to please her because she loved it. RIGHT: With "Northeastern Field Dragon" I wanted a "Robert Bateman" (the noted nature painter) approach to dragon illustration. This is one of my favorite paintings, but it's often overlooked when displayed, perhaps due to its prosaic color scheme.

in "Airborne." She is one of the few winged humanoids whose wings look as if they could actually support her. And in keeping with the title, he makes her float, lighter than air.

The other great strength of Bob's art is his use of color. Deep, rich, flowing, he uses color to show us a world of sensation we want to experience rather than the one we usually do. The cloth in Bob's paintings have a tactile look — the velvets look as if they'd feel soft, the canvas as if it would rub. He manages to capture both the moods and smells of the outdoors. Look at "Dankden" again, and tell me how that wood feels, tell me how the area smells. You can, because of the power of Bob's art.

I have worked with a lot of artists in my career, but I always have a special place in my heart for Bob. That's partly because we grew up together. But it's mostly because the voters were right to give Bob the Hugo in 1994. He is, and always will be, one of our best. ♣







*This is a story about a haunted house and some of its terrible inhabitants.
But it's not really a fantasy at all. You'll see.*

THE HOUSE

BY ANNE HARRIS
Illustration by J. K. Potter

I am but one of the many inhabitants of this house. There are others, each fulfilling their station, each vying to transcend their status. Strange creatures crouch along the stairways, unknown forms swim in the flooded basement. We are allies and enemies, and the stories of our feuds are stories of the

struggle for dominance. Our lives are spent playing king of the mountain. Each of us wants nothing more than to look out those precious windows, and nothing less than to deny the others a glimpse of what lies beyond.

This is the story of my ascent to the heights of awareness. It is but one of many tales of similar character.

It began on the day I read Faust, the day Isobel came to visit. I was in my room—for I have always had a room, not like those ragamuffin waifs who wander the halls, barely present even to themselves. I looked up and there she was, standing in the doorway, her fine gown transparent in the lamplight. I put down

my book and reached out to her, for, mark my words, we do make alliances and even harbor affections for one another.

Isobel lay down beside me, her body light and warm along my side. Her soft, pale hair fell across my cheek as she whispered in my ear: "Gustov's going up tomorrow."

Gustov. I hate him. We can't remain in the same room for five minutes without spitting in each other's eyes. And that pig thought he could look out the windows. If he was right, it would go badly for me indeed. I'd probably be relegated to the basement, to that formless morass of activity. I would no longer have a room, or even a name.

Still it was necessary to put on the right kind of attitude, especially for my dear, sweet Isobel. Casually I played with an ash blonde curl lying across my face. "What makes you say that, dear? Gustov wouldn't go up if his brandy habit depended on it."

Isobel sat up, curling her tail around her. She giggled, and stuck a clawed finger in her mouth. "It does."

"Azazel?"

"She's enacting abstinence." Isobel looked as if she wished she hadn't said it. I drew her closer, caressing her veiled breasts.

That evening I wandered into the library. Gustov was there, lurking in the corner. I could just make out his eyes, glittering behind the cover of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. I wanted to know just what vain-glorious conceit or deadly secret allowed him to contemplate dethroning Azazel, so I threw the obvious truth in his face. "Read while you may, Gustov, my friend. For those who swim in the basement have not the hands to hold books, nor the minds to read them."

He lowered his text, and smiled at me. A small satisfied smile, smooth and slippery on the surface, with a core of hardened loathing at its core, like a pearl formed around a speck of filth. "I'm glad you realize that, Nolan"; without waiting for a response, he returned to his book. He was not interested in boasting, which was unusual for him. In the absence of his accustomed braggery, Gustov seemed to have become someone else. Someone perhaps capable of claiming the attic for his own.

I faded softly out of the library and wandered into the kitchen, where I encountered one of Gustov's confederates, Reynard, dipping his fingers into a pot of stew and licking them. I suddenly remembered seeing him with Gustov several days ago, the two of them digging through the buried treasures in the old linen closet on the third floor. At the time I had dismissed their rootings as idle curiosity, but now I reconsidered. If they had found something there that gave Gustov the confidence to confront Azazel, I needed to know what it was.

"Good stew?" I asked him.

Reynard looked up, sauce dribbling down his chin, and backed away. He was a coward, and had always been afraid of me.

"What's wrong, Reynard?" I said, "Afraid that if Gustov makes it he'll forget about you? Can't say as I blame you. After all, what use will he have for you, when he can see out the windows? He will have new friends then. Even now he is making fresh alliances. I just saw him in the library, talking to Jane." It was a useful lie. Jane had once been Reynard's lover, before they fell out over the old 45 collection. They had been Reynard's prize possession, and Jane gave them to Isobel, who traded them to Hermene for the ballet slippers. This was during the budget crisis of '68, so Hermene sold the 45s to Johnny Gates for cigarette money, and Johnny gave them to Azazel, who sold them at the yard sale.

When Reynard heard about it he was devastated. Congenitally incapable of confronting Jane, he got rat poison and put it in her coffee. Of course it made everyone sick, but Azazel put it up to the Christmas ham.

Not many people knew about the poison, I reflected. In fact the only reason I knew was that Isobel and Jane were lovers in those days, and Isobel never has been all that good at keeping secrets from me.

I scanned the stove top. "No little bottles, Reynard?" I said casually. "Having a good day, I suppose."

Reynard froze. If Azazel heard of the incident, it would be the basement for him. He stared at me with wide eyes, a small, involuntary whimper escaping his lips.

"Relax, my dear man," I said. "You don't really know me. All you know is what your supposed friend Gustov has told you. Most of it lies, the rest selective truths. I can be a very tolerant man, as long as I'm not provoked." I glanced at the spice rack over the stove, bulging with jars and bottles of various substances. I pretended to take great care in selecting a small unlabeled bottle of deep brown liquid. I removed the cap and held the bottle over the stew pot, angling it slightly. "I'm not hungry tonight, what about you?"

"That's not poison!" blurted Reynard.

I paused and stared at him, my hand still hovering over the stew

with the bottle. Slowly I withdrew it, still gazing at him thoughtfully. "Poison? So it was you." I screwed the cap on the bottle and replaced it in the rack. "I always thought so but I'd never had proof before."

Reynard's jaw worked, but all that came from his mouth was a strange, choked squawking. His eyes were avoid as saucers, and he pressed himself up against the window in the tiny breakfast nook beside the stove, desperate to evade me.

I stepped closer. "You were with Gustov yesterday in the closet on the third floor," I said in an undertone. "What did you find?"

His face quivered, his eyes shifting to avoid mine. I angled my head and brought my face closer to his, trapping him with my eyes.

"We didn't. We didn't find anything."

"Then why does Gustov think he can go up and get away with it?"

"He... he..." Reynard was quaking now.

"I'm sure Azazel would reward me for revealing your past misdeeds. If Gustov is going up, I'll have to do something. He hates me, as you know. All I can hope for is to join forces with Azazel, and one way or another, I'll use you to do it."

"He has the sister's diary."

"Lianne. But she was before the shattering. Nobody knows what happened then. It's like having the book before Genesis."

"Exactly."

"How did he find it? No, never mind that now. What has he learned?"

Reynard shook his head. "Oh, he hasn't told me. He showed me the diary, but he didn't let me read any of it. All I know is he asked me to help him find a toy."

"A toy?"

Reynard nodded. "A pull toy, a pony. But we didn't find it, and he told me to stop looking."

I left Reynard and returned to the dusky hallway. The great staircase rose up, the geometry of my life implicit in its structure. Beneath the stairs is a closet. A bizarre, triangular space strange even for this house. It is a dangerous place because one never knows what one will find. At any moment an innocuous object may shift aside like a receding wave to reveal some unrecalled horror.

I opened the little door and reached inside for the cord that turns on the light. In the golden haze of the incandescent bulb, myriad forgotten treasures stood revealed before my

eyes. An old Tiddly-winks set perched atop a box nearly overflowing with tiny plastic soldiers. A typewriter—its keys inscribed with characters I do not understand—leaned against a portable record player, both of them arrested in their glacial slide off a stack of magazines by the restraining barrel of a "Little Sportsman" air rifle.

I rolled up my sleeves and plunged into the closet like a swimmer diving into a sea of memories. Fragments of the past whirled around me, hinting at things half remembered; old existences, ancient dreams and terrors. Beneath the shattered remains of a train set, I found it; a child's pull-toy, weathered by time. It was a crude wood cut-out, pasted with colorful paper. It had bright yellow wheels for legs, and its flat-sided irregular head, like a small, thick artist's palette, bobbed perilously on a spring. Lettering on its flank declared that this most un-equine creature was Pokey Pony. I never would have guessed.

I wondered why Gustov had not found it first. Had it concealed itself from him, as these things sometimes do? Or perhaps he had never looked here. But surely it was not fear that kept him away. After all, he had the temerity to attempt the attic, and he had the diary, and had doubtlessly been someplace far worse than this to get it.

I took the toy and secluded it under my topcoat, and returned to my room. I set it on the bureau and lay on the bed on my stomach, staring at it. The bulbous, flat-sided head bobbed slightly, like a con-

tinant wiggling through geologic time. There was something familiar about its shape. The outline of the blob was like a visual word in the memory's vocabulary.

I jumped up at the emotional echo of the thing, grabbed pencil and paper, and pushed Pokey Pony down on the bureau and traced its head. Many times I wished to stop as my hand mapped that wavering outline, but my very level of irrational fear made me certain that I had captured a powerful weapon. I could only feel the pain of the memory, not its source or meaning. I did not know what happened last these eyes beheld that misshapen head, but I knew someone who would.

Balthazar lived nearly in the basement, in a small cubbyhole off the landing where the stairs descended into the watery depths. The space provided access to the pipes of the first

floor bathtub. Balthazar wound himself around their copper limbs, himself becoming a fluid thing of speculative flesh. Carrying a bowl of milk, I approached the cubbyhole softly, not wishing to wake him if he were asleep. Balthazar slept a great deal, pouring into the pipes around him all the contents of his dreams.

A long pale length of tail dribbled from the alcove and trailed down the steps, resting with its tip in the water. Through the pipes I could just make out Balthazar's flat head, resting on a coil of himself wound round a drainpipe. His eyes were open. His voice hissed like steam. "Deep things are surfacing."

I proffered the milk, setting it down carefully on the floor of the landing and stepping back.

Slowly, like an idea taking shape, Balthazar's head emerged from the pipework to sip at the milk. When he finished I showed him the tracing. He hissed in surprise and withdrew once more to the confines of the plumbing, peering guardedly at the drawing from between the pipes.

"You look at it," he whispered. "I am not going adventuring, I do not need a map, but you do. Look at it."

"What is it?" I asked, flipping the drawing over so I could see it.

"It is a dark country. The place we went long ago, when we were only one. It is the place where you and I were born."

I stared at the shape until its outline became incandescent, and in those flashes of light I heard the Belt coming down on flesh, heard the bubbling sounds of crying, and smelled the bitterness of blood. "It was there," I whispered. "This thing was present at the shattering."

"Yesss," said Balthazar, and he uncoiled his tail, sliding it farther down the steps to whip the water into waves. The splashing of his tail was soon drowned out by the cries of disturbed memories, and I crumpled the paper in my hand and fled.

Pokey Pony was not a weapon. It was a gateway to the shattering, through which I might garner many devastating weapons, if I could keep from being destroyed by their discovery. I took Balthazar's advice to heart, and studied the tracing like a map. The coastline was in most places smooth and curving, except in the northwest, where tendrils shot out in an estuary of hair. I looked up at the toy sitting on the bureau, but I couldn't look for very long. It glowed, and the bright patches of gingham on its colored paper hide wanted to pull me deep into the dark country, all at once. I felt it was best to map a route.

With my pencil I traced the hair inland until the separate strands combined to form a single river, diving through the heartland of the continent. My hand suddenly skittered across the page with the pencil, landing me in the northwestern region, where I drew a large, oval lake, and looked up on the bureau, at the pony's eye.

It took every fiber of my construction to remain intact, to tear my eyes away before I dissolved forever in those limpid paste paper

depths. I dropped the pencil and paper as if burned, and fled the room, taking the staircase up to the library, which was blessedly empty.

I have always been fond of Victorian adventure fiction; bold men tracking through the wilderness, defeating inchoate nature with the power of reason. For hours I lost myself in such exploits, reading and later poring over maps, tracing the routes to places I have never been.

It was not until the following morning that I returned—reluctantly and with my eyes cast downward—to my room and the terrible revelations in a pony's painted eye. The first thing I saw when I opened the door was the toy lying on the floor near the bureau. I glanced away, understanding immediately what had happened. The fragrance of lily-of-the-valley still floated through the air, and scattered about the room—hanging from bedpost, chair, and picture frame—were the shredded remains of her gossamer robes.

Poor, treacherous, inquisitive little Isobel. She was gone now, dispersed into the formless ocean of fragmented souls in the basement. I couldn't be certain if she came here on her own initiative or at the behest of Gustov, but I did know that my time was running out. Gustov would make his play for the attic soon, if not earlier. I had to act.

I changed into my best suit of clothes, polished my shoes, donned a top hat, and put a clean handkerchief in my breast pocket. And then I opened the top drawer of the bureau, and took out the Pocket Watch. It had belonged once to someone trusted. It didn't run but I always found the round white dial comforting; its numbers carefully dividing existence into twelve equal portions. It constituted proof of an ordered world, somewhere. I opened up the back and read the magical words inscribed inside, "To G.D., with all my love, your wife, S.D." These words were further evidence of a different world from mine. A world where people loved each other, and were not afraid to say so.

Fortified, I attached the watch chain to my waistcoat and tucked the watch into the pocket. Up until this time I had, with considerable effort, ignored the toy lying on the floor. I approached it gingerly now, focusing my eyes on the thin plastic cord that trailed from a staple beneath the painted bridle. I grasped the cord and straightened up and turned around, pulling Pokey Pony behind me.

We caused quite a stir as we went down the hallway, the little painted horse and I. It made a completely un-horselike croaking noise as it rolled along, bent axles lifting first the hindquarters and then the front in a rollicking gait. Howls and screams rose up from the hallway's more tenuous occupants at the sound. At the steps I was obliged to pick it up and carry it, and the screaming subsided a bit, but I could hear the whispering echoes of insubstantial bodies flowing up the steps behind me. I climbed up and up, higher than I'd ever been before, dragging an army of disenfranchised personalities behind me. In the absence of Pokey Pony's croak, the beings took it up as a mass chant, and the walls of these sparsely populated floors echoed with their voices.

Finally, on the landing of some unnumbered floor, a being of shadowy darkness with glowing yellow eyes separated itself from the dusky wallpaper to face me. This was Maybone, the gatekeeper, posted here to prevent interlopers from gaining access to the attic. "You are nothing but a construct, Nolan. An artifact of an ordered existence," she said. "Go back to your floor before there is nothing left of you but a thread in Balthazar's dreaming."

As I took Pokey Pony from under my arm, the wheels creaked, and Maybone cringed at the sound. She put out an arm to push me down the stairs but I sidestepped her and thrust the toy in her face. "Look," I said. "Look at it, and become a figment of watery sleep."

She cried out and twisted from me, her yellow eyes skittering away from the toy. She buried her face in her dark clawed hands and turned to the wall for solace, and I passed on alone to the attic stairs.

Access to the attic was through a trap door at the top of a steep narrow staircase. I paused, my head inches from its threshold, and heard voices above. Gustov was already there. I heard his nasal baritone, and the lilting, cultured tones of Azazel. I gripped Pokey Pony in one hand and with the other threw open the trap door.

The attic was a vast space, brighter than any part of the house I'd ever seen before. Above, the eaves slanted down, their beams like the

Continued on page 74

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THE HOUSE

Continued from page 73

ribs of some great beast. In the distance I could see the windows—the windows!—glimmering with a brightness to fracture the eye. But between myself and their beckoning radiance were Azazel and Gustov, locked in combat.

I flinched at the sight of Gustov's weapon. He had the Belt, and he was beating Azazel about the head and shoulders with it. Blood stood out in streaks across her golden face and arms. So he had found the instrument of our torture, somewhere, somehow, and now he sought to be Dad with it. But I knew, because I had seen and survived the truth in Pokey Pony's eye, that it was not we who wielded the Belt, not we who beat and tortured. It had been done to us, and I had the witness with me.

Azazel noticed me first. (Had I been wise, I would have hidden until one of them had vanquished the other.) "Ah," she cried, "it is your friend Nolan."

At this Gustov turned, and with murder in his eyes he came at me, whirling the Belt over his head.

I thought the first stinging slap would dissolve me, but instead I howled with all the pain of being a child, gripped the toy and remembered that I was a child no longer. I stepped toward Gustov, so that the Belt whipped over my back, the buckle biting me through my clothes. I lifted Pokey Pony, stretching the head on its spring neck so that it stood between our faces. "Look," I said. "The eye saw you. It happened to you!"

He looked into the pony's eye, and I did too, but I was on the other side of that two-sided head, and I was looking at myself, tied with twine and being beaten bloody by my father and his Belt.

Gustov dispersed in a mist of sweat and cognac, his various components—a silk ascot, a rhinestone cufflink—whirling away into the cavernous attic to lie, dispersed and impotent, in the shadows of the eaves.

I set Pokey Pony on the floor and walked toward Azazel, tugging my toy behind me by its little plastic lead. She did not flinch at the croak of our progress, but stood quite still, shining golden and angelic with pink stripes across her face. I stopped before her and she looked for a long time at the little wooden pony by my side, and then up, into my face. She nodded, stepped aside, and swept one arm in the direction of the windows. "I see it now. I see it all now. But only because you did first."

I brushed past her, heeding only the croak, croak, croak of Pokey Pony as I stepped toward the windows. At first the light was blinding, but I stared at those shining white spaces of air, getting closer and closer, until I was at the windows and looking out at the sky, and down onto the variegated plains of my body, rolling away from my window eyes like a vast and unmapped land. ■

LAST FAMILY

Continued from page 53

sibility of his own disbelief. It is this way in fact: the doubt which came from within, covered by the voice of the Rebbitzin and his own enraged responses now emerge from the Rabbi's own need and it speaks in its own rhetoric. This time it speaks not the imprecise Esperanto of the Rebbitzin's doubt but the perfectly formulated Hebrew and Aramaic of the Rabbi's own Torah.

Oh, Ashmodai, the voice without, that voice which came from kugels and screams the good Rabbi could cast apart; but this inner voice, this voice which in the purest of Aramaic says *Mene mene tekel uparshin*, along with other confidences from the Pentateuch and the Book of Daniel — this voice attacks the Rabbi from within, can only be met within, and the good man, whose eyes have beheld the wonders of tomes of Talmud and scrolls of parchment Torah — finds that he is now quite undone, that he is crumbling from the center, that it is the breathing testament of his own soul — and not the kugels and festooning crepe of the household spir- its which is crumbling.

So the Rabbi lies in his tormented bed at night, tossing and turning in anguish, solemn and shaken in his dilemma, arks and covenants bestirring themselves to flame in his damaged consciousness. He takes himself again and again to the Mikvah, casts himself into that womb and grave of water, pleading for the silencing of the voice, the banishing of the voice. But as he ducks and bobs and clings and scuttles in those waters, it is the voice which overtakes him; it is his inner voice, it is the voice of the Bad Angel confiding to me over and again (yes, Ashmodei and I accompany him to the Mikvah, the three of us go everywhere together now all of the time) saying, *Do you see? Do you see now? Do you see the obscure and fervid lightning of faith? Do you understand its truest source of life?*

I do. I think I have always known this. And so as the Rebbitzin weaves her baskets in Pilgrim State, as the Heavenly Host lifts chalices and laughs, as the Rabbi surfaces from the waters of the Mikvah still shouting, still doubting, swearing like Jonah at his gourd, the colors of the water, the prism of his apostasy ... the Bad Angel and I, Ashmodai and Uriel, prisoners and penitents to the end, collide in this fabric of final design: "Told you," Ashmodai says, "told you, told you." And the Rabbi's roar of denunciation enormous in the tiled and hollow spaces — as if for the first time — the Serpent of Heaven slithers slowly through the gates. Lift up your heads oh ye gates as we all come plodding home. Selah.

"It is done," the Rabbi says. "It is finished."

And I must — oh fathers and judges, hear my confession, hear from this mountain the words of Uriel — I must, against my will, utter "Amen." ♦

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Microprose's latest empire builder is as good as a box of chocolates.

MICROPROSE SOFTWARE, NOW A PART OF SPECTRUM HOLOBYTE, HAS LONG BEEN responsible for the most addictive games ever to hit a computer. You may think that *Doom* and *Quake* are compelling, and sure, everyone likes to turn demons into grease spots every now and then. But all those 3D shoot-em-ups are only passing fancies. On the addictiveness scale, *Doom* is popcorn. *Civilization* and *Master of Orion* (*Civ* and *MOO* as their fans affectionately refer to them) are Godiva chocolates. Hundreds of games cross my desk in an average year, but these two old standbys never let me down.

Both *Civ* and *MOO* are the type of games generally referred to as "empire builders." In *Civilization* you start with a tiny village and try to build it into a world-spanning empire. In *Master of Orion* your ambitions are even higher. Starting from a base on one planet, you must spread your civilization across a galaxy. There are any number of similar games on the shelves, but the Microprose offerings shared features — researching for new technologies and diplomacy with other races — which set them apart from the crowd. In particular, the diplomacy engine of *Master of Orion* (often duplicated but never equaled) was one of the more innovative and important sections ever added to a game. There's nothing else quite like it. Or at least, there wasn't until now. Now there's *MOO2*.

The original game was done in low resolution graphics designed for a standard VGA card under regular DOS. This time they were aim-

ing at a high resolution experience. And the changes didn't stop with graphics. Everything was to be bigger in this edition. More races, more weapons, more technological advances, more gameplay options — more everything. My fear was that the result of all these additions would be more complexity. The original *Master of Orion* skated the thin edge of perfection. It wasn't so simplistic that it became a walkover, but it wasn't so complex that it kept my nose in the manual.

Five minutes after I booted the disk, my fears had begun to fade. A couple of hours later, I knew that Micro-

prose had done it again. *Master of Orion II* is every bit as compelling as the original.

There are a few changes in the basic structure of the game. Where each star used to represent only a single planet, in *MOO2* they are complete star systems. If you're lucky, you may find four or five planets all under one "roof." Since building colony bases to move from

planet to planet is considerably cheaper than building ships which can move from system to system, it can pay to stay home and bolster a system already in your empire before pressing outward, but eventually you must expand or die.

Many of the races will be familiar to those that played the original game. You'll still find the insectile Klackons, the sneaky Darlocks, and those ever-smiling diplomats, the humans (now lead by a bare-pated fellow with a distinct Jean-Luc appearance). There are also some new races, such as the alluring Elerians. Even if you pick one that's old hat, don't judge a race by its history. There have been big changes in race abilities from *MOO*, and some of the new powers can make a big difference.

Another new factor is leaders. Anyone who played Microprose's *Master of Magic* — a less successful member of the family — will remember the effect of randomly appearing heroes. This idea has been carted over to *Master of Orion II*. Leaders can appear in the form of ship leaders, who can improve the power of your interstellar craft, and system leaders, who administer planetary systems. Leaders are sometimes found while wandering the stars. More often they will come to you and apply for



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work. Knowing who to hire and who to reject is a strategy in itself.

Researching to advance the available technology was a key part of the first game and it remains a strong feature in the new version. This time you've got some tough choices to make. Technologies appear in groups of 1-4, and most races can pick only one to research. Will you learn hydroponic farms to produce more food, or biospheres to increase your planet's population? The only way to get the technology you didn't select is to trade knowledge with another race.

The wonders of interstellar diplomacy also return, along with a much enhanced system of espionage. As before, you'll often face the situation of having to smile and make nice with an opposing ambassador while his spies are stealing you blind. My advice: take it as long as you have to. The battle skills of the computer opponents were already strong, but now they're merciless. Give an enemy a reason to attack, and you better be very sure you can handle him.

Along with the skillful computer players, MOO2 offers numerous options for playing over modem and Internet. Imagine playing an eight-race game in which the opposing races are all human beings. And there are options for strategic play, and for creating custom races, and there's an alterate universe full of nasty Antereans that are after my colonies. *Master of Orion II* is bigger. And better.

POP AND GO RPG

Lately I've been bemoaning the relative lack of role-playing games for computers. However, Sony Playstation owners have been treated to some slick mixtures of adventure and action. The original *King's Field* offered a traditional fantasy environment crossed with first person perspective play. Now Playstation owners get a second dose of fantasy role-playing in ASCII's *King's Field II*. *King's Field II* improves on the design in almost every way. Character motion is faster, smoother, and more varied. The design of creatures, while still angular, has been considerably augmented by the addition of more polygons, better textures and (at last) faces. The world is several times larger than before, and the story makes better use of the world to generate a longer, more interactive quest. Those who liked the first game are bound to be pleased by the improvements. Those who were frustrated by the slow, blocky world and limited gameplay of the first game will find this second incarnation worth another look.

Though the storyline may be staid, everything else about *King's Field II* is sharp, crisp, and innovative. Gamers who expect nothing more out of dedicated consoles than "jump and twitch" gaming may have to revise their estimates. Some of the best and most complex games available are now being played on television screens. **A**

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FOLKROOTS

Continued from page 31

of the first to bring this art to the world's attention. Today, her great-niece Omayra Amaya leads her own dance troupe in Boston (*Amaya, Flamenco Sin Limites*), an extraordinary group of dancers at the forefront of the Nuevo Flamenco movement. "My father was a dancer, my mother was a dancer, cousins, uncles, musicians and singers. Everybody was involved with flamenco," Amayo reminisces about her childhood. Ellen Kushner interviewed Amaya, and featured selections of Gypsy music, on her weekly American Public Radio program "Sound and Spirit"; for a transcript of Kushner's fascinating "Gypsy" show, write: WGBH Radio, 123 Western Avenue, Boston, MA, 02134 (or e-mail: SPIRIT@EMAIL.PRI.ORG). Kalyi Jag (Black Fire) is an example of one of the terrific new flamenco bands, bringing this music back to a world stage. I also recommend Ketama, a Spanish group that mixes jazz and African rhythms with traditional flamenco sound. If you are interested in hearing more Gypsy music, look for a recording called "The Young Flamencos", Paco de Lucia's "Zyryab", "Cante Gitano: Gypsy Flamenco from Andalucia", and The Gypsy King's "Tierra Gitana".

Writers from Cervantes to Federico Garcia Lorca have drawn inspiration from Gypsy music, dance, folktales, and way of life. In America, Gypsy folklore has come to the fantasy field in the work of three writers: Charles de Lint, Steven Brust, and Megan Lindholm. Canadian author Charles de Lint has created flamboyant Gypsy-like characters in various of his "imaginary world" tales, but in the novel *Mulengro* he ventured more solidly into the real-life world of Canadian Rom. This urban fantasy novel, set on the streets of modern Canada, blends myth, magic and music into a tale exploring the clash between Gypsy and nonGypsy ways of life.

Although faced with continuing political and cultural persecution, one still finds Travellers on the road today, making music, telling tales, tricking the *gadjo*, raising their children, struggling to get by. "To be free, to have money, to live well, and not to work are the things we prize most," one aged Gypsy dancer asserted to historian Bertha Quintana, although another woman added, "Men have more time to indulge in fantasies about freedom. Women have to worry about the table." Gypsy artistry in many forms continues to enrich each culture it touches, each land they pass through. Stories of the road, songs of heart, music drawn from the point where passion and grief entwine and transform into joy ... all this is part of the Gypsies' lore, and their generous gift to the *gadjo*. ♦

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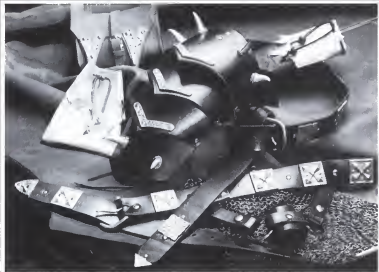
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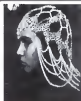
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LAWNMOWER MOE

Continued from page 63

next to the door. There was a bunch of grass on them and the toes of those white Reeboks had stained green. Just confirmed her hypothesis.

She went in to make flapjacks and six-year-old Jeremy came in, too, and said, "Could you make those damned pancakes with chocolate chips?"

And that morning of the third day since his Dad "let" him mow, when the new moon that had been reborn into a sliver had set, Chris got up and went to the window and looked out at what he'd mowed the night before. And a white chill ran through him.

Iva May said, "What's wrong, son? You look pale."

"I missed a damned row," he replied.

"Pardon?"

"I missed a whole damned row—" Out in the close-cropped parts of the field was a strip of vegetation.

"I wouldn't worry about it—" she replied. "Get it next time. Why don't you go on down to the mail with your friends."

"I missed a damned row!" And without even putting on his shoes, he leapt through the door out into the field.

Six-year-old Jeremy said, "He's been fucking weird since Dad died."

"Shut up," said Iva May.

He stood there in his briefs, looking at that row. It stretched from one side of the property to the other, a long line of green. The grass was waist high, and little tendrils of poison ivy and greenbriar and kudzu snaked around inside it. And the brambles jutted up here and there. And here and there, were little trees, just a few little trees.

"Oh, shit," said Chris aloud. Five little trees.

And the breeze picked up, hissing in the grass and something like an ear opened up in Chris's gut, and he heard the whispering: *Silad clann; Silad clann; Silad clann; Silad clann*—a single ancient runic letter. *Silad clann; Silad clann; Silad clann; Silad clann*. It was just a single letter, a letter that signified—what? He knew. He knew! The growing of grass! And the earth. The plants and earth remembered the ancient wisdom and they were trying to wake him!

Oh, damn, he thought with an electric shiver of fear. *I am a Druid.*

He heard singing only Druid-shamen could hear and the letter *Li sula Li sula Li sula Li sula*: It meant flame and the delight of an eye and the life-movement of trees. They were trying to teach him ancient letters, ancient magic words, the alphabet of the grasses and animals and the big, magic ancient trees! And the horror of knowing this was too much, and he ran into the house and slammed his bedroom door behind him. A Druidic wind chased him in.

AND THAT NIGHT HE WENT OUT TO FIND Lawnmower Moe standing in the field

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with his hands resting disgustedly on his own lovehandles and looking at that row. And the old man said, "I knew you would miss a row."

"What the hell does it all mean?"

Lawnmower Moe looked into his son's eye with fury: "Do you not understand what I have worked against all these years? What I fought so hard to preserve?"

"No, I —"

"Damn it, it is in our blood! And I have come even from the grave to make sure it doesn't take over!"

"What are you talking about?" But he somehow knew.

"It's in my blood, mine and yours, boy! You think centuries can wipe it away? And Good God, it is too powerful — it wipes us away, it demolishes what we think we are! Don't you understand how important it is to keep it back?" And of course Lawnmower Moe hadn't known consciously in life that he was doing his utmost to squelch his own power. "Don't you want to preserve who you are, who I am, what our lives have been? You think we can live normal lives in a pasture taken over by weeds and wild trees?" And the divine madness of what men can be? The ghost of Lawnmower Moe was visibly shaken.

Let it go, Dad! Chris thought involuntarily, and then he looked at the unmowed row. The five trees, spaced roughly evenly across the acreage, were visibly growing, moving upward, expanding and stretching toward the starry heavens. And he felt their power, their power in me! The awesomeness and the beauty stunned him and echoed down into his deepest interior, the one his father had worked so hard to ignore.

The five great trees of the ancient Druid poet-shamen blasted upward, their branches scattering across the sky, the boughs opening up like the frames of windows into heaven, and the trees sang with all the letters of the full magic Ogham alphabet, the one scratched into ancient Irish stones, and they sang their sparkling star-charms, and danced their writhing serpent songs.

And Chris felt the pulse of the wisdom-music in him. And he felt the fear, because even a moment's full memory of the power in his blood, the power in his people — that memory could obliterate everything, every sense of self and purpose and every possibility for a normal, everyday life.

The trees grew and grew and Chris looked for his Dad. And Lawnmower Moe shrugged; he was crying. He said to his son, "Don't you see now, how hard a man must work —" His large belly trembled. "How hard a man must work to keep himself?"

Or keep from himself? What self?

"So why the hell didn't you just get a brush-hog and end it all?" But Chris knew the answer already. No matter how hard the old man — all unconsciously — had fought against it, he was fascinated — equally unconsciously — by the truth of who he really was,

despite himself. So he could not come to completely obliterate it, he kept himself at the edge where the kudzu tendrils and the tiny tree limbs grew incessantly, scraping at his heel.

And then Chris felt the full force, the full magic, the awesome beautiful power that pulsed through his own arms. And it scared the shit out of him, and he ran inside.

MORNING: CHRIS LOOKED OUT WITH A WILD trepidation to the unmowed row and saw that the massive trees of the night before had been mere hallucination. Mere hallucination, he told himself, of the trees and of their singing and of his dad.

I've spent too much time damned time living in the mall, being me, too much hoping for my future, to think I could give into it, into the madness of hallucination. Too much security here, to let the roots of some god-tree rip me outta what I know. I'll go watch Jeopardy, instead, with Grandma Caitlin. And to hell with that old man if he couldn't do the damned job. There is too much danger to flirt at the edge. I will not unconsciously keep that yard alive while supposedly holding it at bay. I will deliberately obliterate it.

So that day Chris Hart took Iva May's savings, with Iva May's tacit approval, and bought a brush hog. It was with a great deal of relish that he mowed those forty acres in a single day and left not one twig standing, and it was with a great deal of satisfaction that he forgot the strange alphabet he'd learned, and, indeed, forgot it was there at all. Lawnmower Moe never came back, never had to, having risen from the dead precisely because his fear of the wonder and the magic of the Druidic trees had chased him down into the grave, had shook his soul so badly he couldn't let it go, he could not let it go. But the brush hog took care of it all: not a sign of weeds, not a sign of the magic growing serpentine trees that waited patiently in his family's blood: at least not enough sign of them to worry that the boy couldn't take care of it himself.

And Chris Hart, indeed, grew to be a man with a powerful although mostly unconscious understanding of how important it was to keep the lawn manicured. He grew up to manhood and become fairly well known writing that award-winning article I've already mentioned, and several others that give psychological explanations of matters, miraculous and otherwise, at the beginning of the 21st century and that make no reference whatsoever to Druids or trees. Chris Hart grew up, rather successfully, ogling his wife's *Victoria's Secrets* and, every couple of weeks, brush-hogging the whole of the forty acres, and he made a decent living writing his articles, line by line, a tank's worth a day and never once again did he even think of the flabby old ghost of Lawnmower Moe. ♦

The Druidic Tree names and Celtic letters featured in this story are real, and are derived from The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom, eds. Caitlin and John Matthews, Element: Shaftesbury, Dorset: 1994.

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BOOKS

Continued from page 18

effectively calls to mind yet another American classic: Herman Melville's marvelously cruel and biting novel *The Confidence Man*.

In the end Monahan resolves all mysteries and presents an explanation both completely surprising, very genuinely horrific and—who knows?—just might be an extremely helpful hint to those investigating real-life poltergeists, providing there are real-life poltergeists.

With *The Bell Witch* the author has set himself a neat little challenge, met it completely, and produced an altogether entertaining book.

I am sure that Christmas will be long gone before this essay appears in the pages of *Realms*, but be assured that Tor's sending me a review copy of Fritz Leiber's *The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich* (Tor Books, NY, NY; 125 pp.; \$18.95 hardcover) has brightened my Yule (though I was sorry to see it only had blank pages where the illustrations by the very talented Jason Van Hollander will go).

Leiber is, of course, among the greatest and most powerful writers of fantasy this country—this world—has produced. It has been a grief to have lost him and no longer be able to anticipate the arrival, now and then, of another piece of magic from his wizardly mind. Now what a delight it is to have a whole new novelette of his pop up from out of nowhere!

Dealings is a mad scientist story with many echoes of Wells's *Invisible Man* as David Hartwell, who is responsible for bringing this discovery into print, points out. It's also clearly an exercise on young Leiber's part to see if he can shake up the reader's trust in time and space in the manner of his mentor, Lovecraft, and it shows that he did, indeed, have the knack.

Also, most decidedly, it demonstrates Leiber had a rare talent for sending chills up and down the reader's backbone, not only during the initial impact of reading the more easily grasped revelations, but the delayed blooming of the creepy little hints tucked in between them. Fritz knew just how to plant little seeds in your head, he did, and I expect that you, too—should you dare to venture into this little book—will be haunted by many later, deeper drawings as to the stigma borne by the scientist because of his rash passages through the fifth dimension, and will be unable to suppress the continuously sprouting insights produced by his speculations on the possibilities lurking in attempts to resurrect the dead by bending the past.

Spooky stuff.

Wind from a Foreign Sky: Book 1 of the Thielmar Chronicles by Katya Reimann (Tor Books, NY; 384 pp.; hardcover; \$23.95).

As a reviewer and an editor, I read so

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many books and manuscripts that I occasionally become weary of the unending parade and forget why I do what I do. When a friend told me to read Katya Reimann's *Wind from a Foreign Sky*, I'd love it, I picked up the book reluctantly. The cover was not distinctive, and it informed me that this was only the first book in a series. So many fantasies these days are multibook series, that this only signaled to my weary brain that Reimann's book was yet another "standard fantasy," with nothing outstanding to recommend it. I plodded resentfully through the opening pages, thinking about how I was going to get revenge on my friend for forcing me to read this book. People walked in and out of the room as I was reading — it being the holiday season — and asked me how the book was. "Okay," I'd admit grudgingly, and exchange a few pleasantries.

But an odd thing happened as I continued to read. I found suddenly that I was beginning to resent these Christmas intruders who would wander in and interrupt my reading. That's when I realized *Wind from a Foreign Sky* had caught me. Like the magic cast by its main character, Gaulty, the book has a magic of its own that binds you in its slender, subtle threads until you find you have no will of your own. That is the best kind of magic a novel can weave.

Wind from a Foreign Sky tells the story of Gaulty, a young woman who lives simply in the forest with her great aunt, on the border of the Changing Lands, a threatening place of magic. Gaulty and her great aunt are both witches, as is Gaulty's twin sister, Mervion. One day Gaulty is attacked by a group of men on horseback. While her magic helps her fight them, it is not sufficient. Only with the help of a stranger is she able to drive them away. The stranger is Martin Stalker, a man with many secrets. He was present at the death of Gaulty's father from a hunting accident, and the father impressed on Martin a powerful spell that compels Martin to protect Gaulty above all else. Whether he wants to or not, whether he is fundamentally a good man or not (he may have murdered Gaulty's father), he is forced to protect her and make her happy. This is a fascinating situation, and one that both Gaulty and Martin resent.

Characterization is one of Reimann's strong suits, and Gaulty herself is a complex, compelling character. Tomboyish and insecure, she often acts without thinking. Often she acts heroically, but sometimes she acts foolishly. And we can see her growing as a person as the book progresses.

Another strong point of the book is its sense of history. This world is not simple, nor does it feel as if it were created yesterday, as many fantasy worlds do. This is a land with a long and fascinating history, and its past is nearly as important as its present. An ancient prophecy that has caused the prince to take Mervion, Gaulty's twin sister, prisoner, and

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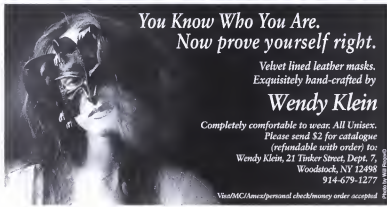
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it is this prophecy that has also put Gaultry in danger. The twins Gaultry and Mervion echo the power of the Twin Goddesses they worship, Eliante the Huntress and Emiera the Lady.

Complex and involving, with freshly imagined characters, *Wind from a Foreign Sky* reminded me why I do what I do: because I love fantasy.

Jeanne Cavelos

Twenty years ago, the world of comic books was a much different place. For one thing, dinosaurs still ruled the Earth. No, not literal dinosaurs—but this was still the early days of independent comic book shops, and the big guys like Marvel, DC, and Archie ruled the roost. Things have changed, and now hundreds of independent titles assail

our senses. It may be impossible to explain to someone new to the field what a breath of fresh air it was to hear a different voice crying out from the midst of all the corporate product.

Into this desert came Wendy and Richard Pini, with a back-up story in a poorly circulated black-and-white magazine called *Fantasy Quarterly*. Although the second part of that title proved to be an unfulfilled prophecy, the gentle fantasy was there, a perfectly realized tale of a band of elves trying to survive on a hostile world of

humans. *Elfquest*, it was called, and when the magazine in which it made its debut vanished, the Pinis built a world for Cutter and Leetah and all the rest in their own magazine, titled, appropriately enough, *Elfquest*.

But the crisis that struck the comic book market in the past few years—rising paper costs, imploding distributors, and the like—affected *Elfquest* as well as the dinosaurs, and so the Pinis have wisely returned to their roots, and have combined their many titles into a single large black-and-white monthly magazine filled with a magical mix of stories. They have decided to be survivors the same way their fierce creations did. The rich life of Cutter, Blood of Ten Chiefs, twenty years later, still enthalls, so as you wait for the forthcoming animated *Elfquest* film, pick up a copy—the dream is still alive. **A**

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

Modern Classics of Fantasy, Edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Press Hardcover, \$29.95. A fabulous collection of fantasy from 1939 to the present. All the master works of fantasy are here! Every fantasy lover should have this book in his library.

The I Inside, by Alan Dean Foster, Warner Aspect Paperback, \$5.99. Fantastic courtly love. A software designer on a quest for the woman he loves. Deadly forces conspire to keep them apart. But destiny cannot be forsaken. A global fantasy from best-selling author Alan Dean Foster.

The Seer King, by Chris Bunch, Warner Aspect Trade Paperback Original \$13.99. A

stirring narrative by the renowned soldier, Damastes. Teamed with a powerful wizard, Tenedos, the two conspire to end corruption in Numantia. An epic tale of battles and flames, love returned and love betrayed. A reign for Tenedos, Emperor of Numantia will end badly, with his soldier comrade facing exile and



death. This is the introductory volume to a new trilogy by an author who fought in Vietnam and worked as a combat correspondent for Stars and Stripes.

Groogleman, by Debra Doyle and James D. MacDonald, Harcourt Brace Children's Books Hardcover \$15.00. Ages 10 and up. The Grooglemen come out of the Deadlands in this lively tale of knighthood and magic. Young Dan must embark on a quest to rescue Leezie, a "weller" who is teaching him to care for the sick; for she has been taken by a Groogleman, creatures of fungus and decay. A book filled with adventure and action—a must-read for the young fantasy lover. From Jane Yolen Books.

The Horror in the Museum and Other Revisions, by H.P. Lovecraft, Carroll News and Graf Trade paperback \$4.95. In this collection you will find a fine selection of collaborative nightmares by H.P. Lovecraft and his dark disciples. Read carefully, those who dare!

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Contributors

SUSAN WADE WAS BORN ON THE DAY Albert Einstein died. Her work has appeared in *Amazing Stories*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and several original anthologies, including Ellen Datlow's recent *Twists of the Tale*. Her first novel, *Walking Rain*, was published by Bantam in August. She is currently working on a thriller about a female firefighter who gets caught up in a serial arson case.

William R. Eakin (Bill) has sold some thirty fantasy and science fiction stories over the past two years to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Space and Time*, *Fortress*, and *The New Sense of Wonder*. His numerous "Redgunk" stories, set in the mythical town of Redgunk Mississippi have received special attention. One Redgunk story won the 1995 Andre Norton SF/Fantasy Award; another received First Place in the 1996 North Texas Professional Writer's Association Fiction Contest. Bill gets his inspiration for the Redgunk tales from real life in Arkansas. Bill and his family live on a large property they call the "Thicket" (after the safe place in Bambi) where, like Lawnmower Moe, he is trying to decide how much of the yard is acreage and how much is field and forest. He doesn't know if he is descended from the Druids or not, but his Grandmother once told him he was. Hence the inspiration for the story.

Anne Harris lives in Royal Oak, Michigan where she works as a freelance journalist. Her first novel, *The Nature of Smoke*, is available from Tor Books. An avid role-playing gamer, Harris is currently pretending to be, on various nights, the dreaded pirate "Red Livvy," "Voudoa Queen Marie LeVeau," and an ambitious Martian priest. "It's nice to get away and be someone else for awhile," says Harris. "Come to think of it that idea has a lot to do with 'The House,' the way different roles we take on can help us or harm us." At the moment, Harris is working on her third book, which concerns the myths of ancient Sumeria and the human instinct for transcendence.

Jeff Potter resides in beautiful Southeastern Massachusetts. If you sense something

truly eerie in his picture, you are right. Jeff's illustration for Anne Harris' "The House," includes two formidably famous models. Poppy Z. Brite is the model for the woman in this piece. The house is "Plas Teg," former home to infamous British Hanging Judge Jeffries, and is said to be the "most haunted house in Wales."



Ken Granning



Richard Parks

KRISTINE KATHERINE RUSCH recently ended her reign as the editor of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine to pursue fiction writing full time. Kristine makes her home in Oregon where she lives with her husband and six cats. She is currently at work on the fourth of "The Fey" novels, entitled *The Resistance*. While Kristine says she will definitely miss editing, she is looking forward to focusing on her writing.

Richard Parks has published fiction in the Esther Friesner-edited "vampires in the arts" anthology *Blood Muse*, as well as the magazines *Abrupt Edge*, *Tomorrow*, *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*, *Dragon* and our sister publication *Science Fiction Age*. He has also been writing criticism for the review magazine *Tangent*.

Doug Anderson has worked in the Aerospace Industry, where he did conceptual renderings of satellite systems and technical illustration for space ship design. He currently teaches drawing and illustration at the University of Hartford. He is inspired by Golden Age illustrators such as Arthur Rackham.

Ken Granning teaches Traditional Illustration at The Center for Creative Studies in Detroit. Once in denial regarding the use of electronic media in the field of art, he is now working with his computer to create some amazing artwork. He is able to create paintings on-screen using a pressure-sensitive digital pen on a tablet connected to the keyboard. This program uses brush strokes to create oils, watercolors and other art mediums. He can also scan original paintings onto his computer screen and from there, alter images, delete, edit and include various elements to the piece. ■



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